NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Plugged into History

Report on the conference to celebrate and interrogate John McGrath's work held at Royal Holloway, University of London, on 19–20 April 2002.

THE TITLE for this event had been suggested by John, he had a central role in planning the event, and it was a matter of deep regret to everyone involved that he was not able to be there, having in January finally succumbed to the leukaemia he had been battling against for several years.

Since the late 1950s, John McGrath had proved his almost unique ability to create work that successfully spanned the three disciplines of writing, directing, and producing for television, for the stage, and for cinema. The conference organizers invited contributions from researchers and practitioners in all three of these fields. Special screenings of film and video work were arranged with the intention of illuminating different aspects of John's achievement. Papers offered by scholars were circulated in advance, and the conference organized around a number of different panel discussions, into which screenings and papers all fed.

The first panel discussion was entitled 'The Scottish Dimension and Beyond', and was chaired by Maria di Cenzo, author of a major study of McGrath's work: *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968–1990: the Case of 7:84 Sotland* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Papers by Randall Stevenson and Olga Taxidou had been circulated, and the discussions turned on the extent to which McGrath's work should be seen as having a cultural specificity that was identifiably Scottish, or should, rather, be seen in its international Socialist dimension. Ian Brown emphasized McGrath's creative connections with a variety of other artists in Scotland and their collective influence on political developments of the second half of the twentieth century. It became very clear that the question of defining the 'Scottish dimension' of his work was extremely complex.

The second panel, chaired by Kiernan Ryan, was devoted to 7:84 (England) and to McGrath's early theatre work in England. This panel discussed papers from Ros Merkin and Nadine Holdsworth. Ros Merkin's paper concerned itself with McGrath's involvement with the work of the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool, while Nadine Holdsworth discussed the one year 1975 in the life and work of 7:84 (England). Nadine Holdsworth is also the editor of *Naked Thoughts That Roam About* (Nick Hern Books, 2002), a compilation of writings by McGrath which attracted much appreciative comment during the conference discussions.

The following panel discussed John McGrath's work in television. It was chaired by John Bull and referred to papers circulated by Lez Cooke, Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey, and Robin Nelson. Lez Cooke discussed McGrath's television play *The Adventures of Frank*, broadcast as a BBC1 'Play for Today' in 1980. Stephen Lacey's paper focused on another television drama, McGrath's adaptation of his own stage play, *Blood Red Roses*, broadcast on Channel 4 in 1985. Jonathan Bignell discussed the importance of McGrath's work, especially *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* for the construction of a theorized history of television drama. Robin Nelson also used *The Cheviot* to present the case against television naturalism.

A conference dinner was addressed by Richard Eyre, who spoke of his personal affection for McGrath and his wife Elizabeth MacLennan, and also of the central importance of McGrath's work for the development of theatre in Britain, despite the tendency of official histories of theatre to marginalize it.

The second day began with a panel on 'Political Performance', chaired by Maggie Gale with papers by Drew Milne, John Bull, and Baz Kershaw. Drew Milne spoke of the staging of history in the plays of John McGrath. John Bull centred his discussion on McGrath's adaptation *Serjeant Musgrave Dances On* (staged with Arden and D'Arcy's *The Ballygombeen Bequest*), while Baz Kershaw invented the idea of 'biopoligraphy' as a way of accounting for a life of radical practices and Michael Kustow recalled McGrath's friendship with Ariane Mnouchkine and his interest in the 1968 events in Paris. After this, Janet Moat, the curator of the British Film Institute's special collections, demonstrated the richness of the BFI's holdings of materials by McGrath.

In interview with Laura Cicognani, author of a thesis on McGrath's work, Elizabeth MacLennan provided wonderful insights into the whole creative process in which she and John McGrath were partners for more than forty years. The final panel discussion was entitled 'Collaborations', and brought together Elizabeth MacLennan, the designers Jenny Tiramani and Pamela Howard (a video-taped statement, since she was in America at the time of the conference), the actors Bill Paterson and John Bett, and the writers Troy Kennedy Martin and Christopher Hampton. The subjects covered included the differences between

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X02210490 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Scottish and English acting traditions, the emphasis on humour and on music in McGrath's work, and its skilful insistence on placing vividly conceived individuals within their cultural and political contexts. What emerged with great force was the gift of both McGrath and MacLennan for engaging the creative energies and commitment of those around them.

Among the screenings at the conference were *Sweetwater Memories* (a documentary written and directed by McGrath about his time as a national serviceman in Egypt), *Border Warfare* (with filmed highlights of this show as performed at the Tramway in Glasgow), an early episode of *Z Cars* written and directed by McGrath, and *There is a Happy Land*. The final session of the conference was a compilation of excerpts from films written, directed, or produced by McGrath, presented by Jack Gold, which included episodes from *The Bofors Gun* and *The Reckoning*. The closing event was a screening of *The Long Roads*.

A book is being planned that will include material drawn from the above papers and discussions, as well as other reflections on McGrath and his work not presented at the conference, for publication by Exeter University Press, which is also publishing the collected plays of McGrath. The conference organizers are convinced that McGrath's seminal importance in the development of British theatre in the second half of the twentieth century will increasingly be recognized in the years to come, and their intention is that the book coming out of this conference should play its part in that process.

Margaret Coldiron

Masks in the Ancient and Modern Theatre

Report of the conference on 'The Greek Theatre Mask in Ancient and Modern Performance', held at the Noh Studio at Royal Holloway, University of London, on 20–21 April 2002.

'The mask makes a link between the mind and the body of the actor and . . . between the animate human being and the inanimate material environment.' *David Wiles's opening remarks*

THIS conference marked the culmination of an AHRB-funded research project, headed by Professor David Wiles, involving mask-makers Michael Chase (UK) and Thanos Vovolis (Greece) along with research students Chris Vervain and Angeliki Varakis. It brought together scholars representing fields as seemingly diverse as Classics, Asian Studies, and Professional Actor Training, and included not only academics but also mask-makers, performers, theatre directors, and students. All had come together to share ideas and gather impressions about an item absolutely central to the mythology of western theatrical culture, yet tantalizingly unknown – the Greek theatre mask.

At the University of Glasgow, the co-sponsors of the conference, Dr Richard Williams heads an AHRB-funded project developing a system for creating 3-D computer images of Greek masks. With his associates, Malcolm Knight of the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre and Adriano Iurissevich, director of the theatre company Venezia INScena, these digital images have been transformed into functional, full-sized masks used by modern actors. This was very much a conference about the mask as a living and functional theatrical tool.

In the week preceding the conference, Wiles, Chase, and Vovolis exchanged ideas and worked with a group of professional actors, already experienced in working with masks, on texts from Aeschylus. Both Chase and Vovolis are interested in the acoustic properties of the Greek mask, and concerned not only with design but also with developing a training for actors using masks. The centrepiece of the conference was a presentation supervised by the Greek theatre director George Zamboulakis of a chorus from *The Persians,* using Vovolis's masks, and four short scenes from the *Oresteia*, using masks made by Michael Chase. The actors and the mask-makers discussed their work and their impressions of the masks in a lively discussion with the conference participants.

Among the formal papers, Dr Toph Marshall, a Classicist from the Memorial University of Newfoundland and director of the theatre company Modern Actors Staging Classics, discussed 'Roman Masks and the Problem of Plautus' Pimps'. He demonstrated some of the discoveries he had made through textual analysis and performance about the design of Roman comedy masks and their connections with stock types of indigenous Italian comedy. Mark Saunders, who teaches movement at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, talked about his work with students on the masked performance of Greek tragedy.

Angeliki Varakis presented a paper and an exhibition about the work of designer Dionysis Fotopoulos, whom she has studied closely in her doctoral research on Aristophanic comedy. Another research student, mask-maker Chris Vervain, spoke about her work with actors on 'Mask, Character, and Stanislavski in Performing Greek Tragedy'. This was followed by the presentation of a scene from *Antigone* performed by former students of Ms Vervain, wearing masks she had created. The scholar/practitioner Dr Margaret Coldiron, theatre director and Asian specialist, gave a presentation

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on connections between Asian theatre traditions and the Greek mask and discussed her work with Thiasos Theatre Company's Indonesian-style production of Euripides' *Hippolytos*.

The actor Greg Hicks has worked for more than twenty years with director Peter Hall in all of his productions of Greek plays with masks: as Orestes in the *Oresteia*, Tiresias in *Oedipus*, Agamemnon and Priam in *Tantalus*, and most recently as Dionysus in the *Bacchae*. The lecture and demonstration that he gave about his discoveries working with masks in ancient Greek plays was a fascinating first-hand account of a wide range of practical and philosophical aspects of mask work. 'Working in the mask took me to places I'd never otherwise have gone', he said, and it taught him 'the expressive power' of his own body.

He demonstrated the ways in which his studies in *capoera* and especially *butoh* have helped him to find the physical precision and control required when working in the mask. He has found that the length of the neck is critical in mask work, as is the ability to make the neck, back, and fingers alive and expressive. Describing the mask as 'the performance on a shelf', he sees it as a means by which the actor can go deeply into his human essence without ego or vanity, allowing energies to play through him. However, he stressed that it is the actor who serves the mask, rather than the reverse. When the mask is removed at the end of a performance, there is a 'clean break' with the character and the play both spiritually and psychologically.

A high point of the conference was the presentation by the renowned mask-maker and sculptor, Donato Sartori on his own work, and that of his father Anello, who essentially re-created the masks of the commedia dell'arte in the early twentieth century. He also discussed in detail the work of the Centro Maschere e Strutture Gestuali, Abani Terme, Italy, of which he is director, where a multi-disciplinary research team is engaged in continuing study of all aspects of the mask, from ethnology to contemporary design.

In addition, Sartori elaborated upon the earlier presentation by Professor Inger Ziefelt (dramaturg of the Folkteatern I Gävleborg, Sweden, and former Professor of Theatre Studies at the Dramatic Institute of Stockholm) about the recent production of the *Oresteia* at Folkteatern I Gävleborg, for which Sartori designed the masks. The project, part of a larger, collaborative World Theatre project involved study of the indigenous mask cultures of Kerala, India, Mozambique, and northern Sweden, acoustical tests at the theatre of Epidaurus and the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, and experiments with Chinese and Japanese mask construction techniques. The meticulously detailed, almost infinitely expressive, lightweight, full-head masks that resulted from this work were displayed together with earlier examples from the Sartori workshops, including masks made for Barrault's 1955 'Voodoo' *Oresteia*.

The conference concluded with remarks from a panel of respondents: Malcolm Knight and Adriano Iurissevich spoke of the transformative power of the mask and the need for mask practitioners to find a methodology for mask work and to develop an 'external eye' which allows the wearer to more skillfully manipulate the expressive capacities of the mask. Yana Zarifi, artistic director of Thiasos Theatre Company, observed that the figures in ancient Greek drama should be understood as 'types' rather than 'characters.' Thus, the 'ego-less-ness' of working in the mask reflects the larger function of the drama not as a demonstration of individual suffering or enlightenment but rather as an expression of the customs and experiences of a community.

Nurit Yaari (Professor of Theatre Studies, University of Tel Aviv), pointed out that from the time of Moses Jewish law forbade the use of masks so there has been no tradition of mask use in the Jewish theatre. She confessed that she had come to the conference with 'a very vague' idea about masks but had learned a great deal. She praised the bringing together of academics and practitioners, allowing the work to be seen and experienced at first hand.

This extraordinary conference raised a number of questions and ignited a few controversies. What is the function of the mask in the theatre? Can it be a means of transforming the actor's consciousness as well as his/her outward appearance? Should it define character, or is it, as Thanos Vovolis asserts, 'a blank screen on which the audience can project their impressions'? The lively debate surrounding the significance and efficacy of the so-called 'acoustic mask' and the psychophysical state of the masked actor indicate that further research in this area is warranted.

The use of masks in modern theatre remains controversial, even among those who regard themselves as advocates. The problem of making the text heard through the mask is a vexed issue as is the matter of design – should masks only cover the face or is a 'helmet' mask more appropriate? Peter Hall's use of masks in his productions of Greek plays seemed to have the broad support of those gathered at the conference, but many questions were raised about both his methodology (working with actors in the masks) and his design choices. Professor Wiles's contention that the mask serves as a means of integrating the mind and body of the actor remains an important matter for further investigation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X02210490 Published online by Cambridge University Press