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Kin(g)ship and Power

Edited by Eric Nicholson

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MARK BROWN*

Waiting for Godot in the Marketplace: Setting the 2018 Edinburgh Festival in Context

Abstract

This article seeks, for those who are unfamiliar either with Edinburgh's summer festivals or, at least, with their origins and history, to set the festival programmes we have today (and, in particular, the theatre programmes of the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe) in their broader historical, economic and cultural context. It then considers (from the author's subjective standpoint) four of the best theatre productions presented in Edinburgh during the festivals of August 2018: namely, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, staged at the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) by the Druid theatre company of Ireland and directed by Garry Hynes; *La Maladie de la mort*, a new adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novella, written by Alice Birch and directed by Katie Mitchell, presented at the EIF by French company Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord; *Unsung*, a new monodrama about the public and private lives of a career politician, by the Flemish theatre collective SKaGeN and performed by Valentijn Dhaenens as part of the Fringe programme of the Summerhall venue; and, finally, *Ulster American*, a political satire written for the Traverse Theatre's Fringe programme by Scotland-based, Northern Irish playwright David Ireland.

KEYWORDS: Curated; open-access; Edinburgh International Festival; Fringe; Song of the Goat; Beckett; Druid; Duras; Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord; SKaGeN; Summerhall; David Ireland; Traverse

The 'Edinburgh Festival', which is held every August in Scotland's capital city, is celebrated as the world's biggest platform for the arts. Although often referred to as a single festival, the August events, in fact, consist of six separate festival programmes¹ including the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (both of which were inaugurated in 1947).

Created in the spirit of optimism following the Second World War, the success of these festivals owes a great deal to their location. Known as 'The Athens of the North' on account of its splendid Gothic and Georgian architectures, Edinburgh is, in many ways, an ideal festival city. Not only does its beauty attract visitors, but, with a current population of just under half a million and a superb range

¹ Details of five of the August festivals, and other festival programmes held in Edinburgh throughout the year, can be found at: edinburghfestivalcity.com. The sixth programme in August is the Edinburgh TV Festival: thetvfestival.com (last access 15 October 2018).

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of permanent² and temporary³ venues, the city has the perfect combination of size and infrastructure.

Any overview of the Edinburgh events must take into consideration the significant differences between the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (the Fringe). The EIF is a prestigious,⁴ relatively well funded⁵ and, crucially, curated programme.⁶ By contrast, the Fringe (which, in its enormous size, largely accounts for Edinburgh's status as the pre-eminent arts festival city in the world) is an open-access festival; if one can afford the registration, venue, accommodation and other related costs, one can stage a show at the Fringe.

The scale and nature of the Fringe makes it something of a double-edged sword in artistic terms. On the one hand, the programme offers audiences an extraordinarily exciting experience of the arts which is unrivalled in its size and diversity. There can be few, if any, festival programmes in the world that provide arts lovers with a greater opportunity, not only to see the work of established artists, but also to stumble across previously undiscovered gems and excellent emerging artists.

However, on the other hand, the open-access programming of the Fringe promotes a commercial 'free-for-all'; to find the undiscovered gems, one may well have to experience a considerable amount of lacklustre art. One sign of the Fringe's position as a commercially oriented arts 'marketplace' is that, in recent times, lucrative stand-up comedy has come to occupy a significantly larger section of the Fringe brochure than theatre does. Big name Fringe producers,⁷ whilst they stage some interesting work, are widely considered to be primarily commercial operations. Although few artists on the Fringe make much money (many leave Edinburgh out of pocket), the big producers tend to be the financial winners.

This said, there are Fringe venues (most notably Scotland's new writing theatre the Traverse and the Summerhall arts centre) which run curated programmes in which artistic concerns take primacy over commercial ones. One small incident, involving the acclaimed Polish theatre company *Song of the Goat*,⁸ provides some insight into the contradictions of the Fringe, and, in particular, the tensions

² Including the splendid Victorian playhouses of the Festival Theatre and the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Scotland's new writing theatre the Traverse and the converted church building of Assembly Roxy.

³ Ranging from lecture halls at the University of Edinburgh to community halls and, even, public toilets; for example, Irish theatre company *Semper Fi* staged their fine and memorable play *Ladies and Gents* in the public lavatories in St James Place during the 2003 Edinburgh Fringe.

⁴ The importance of the Festival to the British state is reflected in the fact that it has been under Royal patronage since its inception in 1947. Queen Elizabeth II was patron between 1952 and 2017, at which point her son, Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, became Royal patron.

⁵ The Festival receives financial support from The City of Edinburgh Council, Creative Scotland (the quasi-non-governmental organisation [or "quango"] tasked with dispensing public money to the arts), the Scottish Government and a number of corporate and individual sponsors and supporters.

⁶ The Festival is curated by its director Fergus Linehan, whose first programme was in 2015.

⁷ Such as Assembly, Underbelly, Pleasance and Gilded Balloon.

⁸ Or *Teatr Pieśń Kozła*, to give them their Polish name.

between commercial and artistic motivations within the planet's single largest arts programme.

Song of the Goat's devised, highly physical, visual, vocal and musical work stands in the tradition of the great Polish theatre master Jerzy Grotowski (indeed, "the Goats", as they are sometimes known, are based in the western Polish city of Wrocław, which was home to Grotowski's famous Laboratory Theatre). As such, their work was a perfect fit for the programme of Aurora Nova, a curated programme of international, largely European, visual theatre, dance and performance, led by German performer-turned-producer Wolfgang Hoffmann, which played in St Stephen's Church during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe from 2001 until 2007;⁹ a period in which, in my opinion, it staged the strongest curated theatre programme to be seen on the Edinburgh Fringe in the last three decades.¹⁰

The Goats' relationship with the Fringe is a conflicted one. The company presented *Chronicles – A Lamentation* (2004) and *Lacrimosa* (2007) at Aurora Nova, to considerable critical and audience acclaim. However, despite this success, the artists felt that the commercialist and consumerist atmosphere of the Fringe was at odds with the reflective, spiritual tone of their work. In 2007, during the run of *Lacrimosa*, the company's artistic director, Grzegorz Bral, told me that Song of the Goat had decided not to play the Fringe in future. The demise of Aurora Nova as a Fringe venue in the same year seemed to make the Goats' absence from the Fringe programme more certain. However, following the establishment of the Summerhall venue in 2011 and the appointment of its founding artistic director Rupert Thomson,¹¹ Bral and his company were attracted back to the Fringe, playing *Songs of Lear* as part of the Summerhall Fringe programme in 2012 and *Return to the Voice* (a co-production with Summerhall, presented in St Giles Cathedral) during the Fringe of 2014.

The tension between the commercialist atmosphere of the Fringe and the work of Song of the Goat had been clear from the very outset. My review of *Chronicles – A Lamentation* for the *Sunday Herald*¹² in 2004 reflected on precisely this friction:

The artistic overload of the Edinburgh Festival can itself become a party to our commercial culture's promotion of shallow gratification. *Chronicles* stands resolutely against that impulse. In its exquisite use of light and flame, and its achingly elegiac use of the human body, it appears like an ever-shifting Caravaggio painting. As near to perfect theatre as I have seen in a very long time, it is food for the soul.¹³

⁹ Aurora Nova has continued to bring work to the Edinburgh Fringe since 2007 in its capacity as a production company.

¹⁰ In its seven years at St Stephen's the programme showcased work by such acclaimed companies as Akhe (Russia), Derevo (Russia) and Farm in the Cave (Czech Republic).

¹¹ Appointed senior programmer for dance and performance for the Southbank Centre in London in 2015.

¹² The Scottish national newspaper which published its final edition on September 2, 2018. Its successor, *The Herald on Sunday*, began publication on September 9, 2018.

¹³ *Sunday Herald*, 15 August 2004, quoted on website of Song of the Goat: piesnkozla.pl/en/archives (last access 15 October 2018).

It is in the context of the above-outlined differences and tensions, both between the EIF and the Fringe, and within the Fringe itself, that I invite the reader to consider the following reflections on four significant theatre productions staged in Edinburgh as part of the festival programmes in August 2018. As noted above, the EIF enjoys considerable esteem, both nationally and internationally. Its programmes are able to attract some of the biggest names in world theatre, from Ariane Mnouchkine and her famed French company Théâtre du Soleil,¹⁴ to Romanian auteur director Silviu Purcărete¹⁵ and the great German theatremaker Peter Stein.¹⁶ The 2018 programme was no different, with work by the exceptional Irish theatre company Druid and leading French company Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (including Katie Mitchell's staging of a new adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novel *La Maladie de la mort*).

Druid's offering, director Garry Hynes's inspired production of Beckett's iconic, existential classic *Waiting for Godot*, was, for my money, the absolute highlight of the 2018 EIF theatre programme. Hynes's staging of Beckett's most famous drama is impressively and movingly attuned to a play that is simultaneously cerebral-yet-playful, and bleak-yet-life-affirming. As I noted in a review written during Festival, the Druid *Godot* succeeds in being "as deep as a treatise by Kierkegaard and as light as an evening at the music hall".¹⁷

It does so, in large part, by playing directly to Beckett's quintessentially modernist sense of the theatrical. The scenography itself (designed by Francis O'Connor) speaks volubly of its own theatricality. Vladimir and Estragon do their interminable waiting in a hyper-real, almost post-apocalyptic wasteland of dried, cracked earth. However, this barren landscape is illuminated boldly and brilliantly within a phosphorescent frame. The framing device is simple-yet-ingenuous. Were Brecht alive to see it, one suspects he would consider it a great alienation effect.

Although the play is, in many ways, a French one (having been written originally in French, as *En attendant Godot*, some twelve years into Beckett's exile in Paris), it is also very much an Irish drama. This fact is emphasised beautifully by Irish actors Marty Rea (Vladimir) and Aaron Monaghan (Estragon). Their touchingly humane, comic and intelligent evocation of their characters' co-dependency is expressed with charming physicality and a delicious enunciation that reminds us that the Irish have long taken revenge on the British by very often writing and speaking the English language better than the British themselves.

Rea and Monaghan's clever, vaudevillian double act is matched by Rory Nolan as the brutish, yet ill-fated, despot Pozzo and Garrett Lombard as his agonisingly oppressed (and repressed) slave Lucky. Nolan plays the tyrant with a grotesquely and humorously inflated sense of his own importance, all the better to express the pathos of his blindness in Act Two. Lombard speaks Lucky's monologue with the tremendous sense of rhythm, meaning and poignancy that is demanded by, sure-

¹⁴ Who presented their show *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir (Aurores)* at the Festival in 2012.

¹⁵ Who was last at the EIF with his acclaimed staging of Goethe's *Faust* in 2009.

¹⁶ Stein's work at the EIF includes the world premiere of Scottish playwright David Harrower's 2005 play *Blackbird*.

¹⁷ *Sunday Herald*, 12 August 2018: scottishstage.wordpress.com/2018/08/19/reviews-edinburgh-festival-2018-august-12/ (Accessed 15 October 2018).

ly, one of the great, humanistic speeches in world theatre. Hynes is widely recognised as a leading director on the contemporary stage. This extremely intelligent and deeply sensitive *Godot* can only enhance her reputation.

If Hynes's staging of Beckett was the standout theatre production of the 2018 EIF programme, Katie Mitchell's staging of *La Maladie de la mort* (which marked her debut at the Festival) was also highly accomplished and profoundly memorable. The production works with a script by writer Alice Birch which honours the spirit of Duras's book, whilst, in some significant ways, liberally altering its perspective.

The novella (which, famously, Duras wrote whilst in the grip of her ferocious alcoholism) tells the story of a man who, believing himself never to have experienced love, asks a woman, who is not a prostitute, if he can pay her to stay with him at a seaside hotel. During the sexual relationship that ensues, the woman comes to the conclusion that the man can never experience love, as he is suffering from "the malady of death".

In Birch's version the young woman appears to be a prostitute who has taken to sex work in order to raise her young child. Mitchell's staging, which combines powerfully a variety of media, brings an extraordinary intensity to the story.

On the left of the stage sits a narrator (Irène Jacob) in a soundproof booth. In certain moments throughout the play she provides radio drama-style narration. Meanwhile, on Alex Eales's extraordinary set (which is part radio studio, part film set, part accurate representation of a hotel room), actors Laetitia Dosch (The Woman) and Nick Fletcher (The Man) give performances that are painfully resigned (her) and alienated (him). As Dosch and Fletcher play out the agonisingly strained, sometimes sickeningly abusive relations between the characters (relations which are seemingly shaped by The Man's addiction to violent, hardcore pornography), a team of three camera operators work, with deliberate obtrusiveness, around them. The consequent live film, which is projected onto a screen above the set, is cut with pre-recorded movie material depicting events beyond the room and from the past. The music (by Paul Clark) and sound (by Donato Wharton) are understated, sinisterly premonitory and in perfect harmony with the general tone of the production.

Mitchell combines these elements with prodigious skill. Every artistic form plays into and through the others. Everything is at the service of the compelling and deadening atmosphere and of the intense, discomfiting performances. Rarely does a stage adaptation of a prose fiction carry this kind of emotional and psychological charge. This production is truly as brilliant as it is disconcerting.

If the stagings of Beckett and Duras were the highlights of the EIF theatre programme, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that two of the strongest Fringe theatre productions emerged from the curated programmes at Summerhall and the Traverse. Valentijn Dhaenens (one of the quartet of theatre artists who make up Antwerp-based company SKaGeN) is well known to Edinburgh Fringe audiences. The writer and performer had hits with his solo shows *BigMouth* and *SmallWar* (which played as part of the Traverse Fringe programmes in 2012 and 2014 respectively). His 2018 Fringe offering, *Unsung*, a monodrama about the rise and fall of a career politician, was presented at Summerhall.

In the play Dhaenens takes on the role of a sharp-suited, image conscious politician (who might be based on Tony Blair in the early days of New Labour or Emmanuel Macron during his rapid rise to power). We witness the man's public speeches, his private political machinations and his uncomfortable private life (the woman to whom we see him talk affectionately via webcam while he is on the campaign trail turns out not to be his wife, but his illicit lover).

The interweaving of these elements is achieved beautifully. The staging is simple, but very effective, and assisted smartly by SKaGeN's typically sharp use of video technology. The speeches, if not actually by Blair and Macron, certainly could be. Their platitudinousness, hollow optimism and lack of substance are depressingly familiar, as is the perfectly observed, well-groomed persona in which Dhaenens delivers them.

The contrast between the politician's public bonhomie and his private political ruthlessness is wonderfully stark; he stabs his long-term "friend", and now political rival, "Fatso" in the back, and would clearly, as the saying goes, "sell his grandmother" to become his party's candidate for the premiership. However, it is in the man's personal meltdown (his marriage seems to have succumbed to the demands of his political career years ago) that the piece takes on real moral depth.

Dhaenens is absolutely captivating in his portrayal of a man in the grip of what the English writer Alan Sillitoe might have called "the loneliness of the long distance politician". Living in hotel rooms, cut off from the lives of his children and his mistress, not to say the regular lives of working and middle-class people themselves, the character becomes a resonatingly complex figure, simultaneously a perpetrator and a victim of the decadent political system that is western democracy in the twenty-first century.

Finally, politics are also to the fore in, arguably, the finest new play to be presented in Edinburgh during August 2018. *Ulster American*, written for the Traverse Theatre by actor and playwright David Ireland,¹⁸ is an excoriating satire of both the London theatre business and the Hollywood movie industry in the "#MeToo" moment. The supposed liberalism of these totems of western culture are exposed to hilarious and purposeful challenge from the dramatist's Northern Irish perspective.

The play is set in the plush London apartment (cleverly envisioned by designer Becky Minto) of West End theatre director Leigh Carver (played with fabulously buttock-clenching liberalism by Robert Jack). There the director is meeting with, first, big name Hollywood actor Jay Conway (an unforgettably gargantuan performance by Darrell D'Silva) and, arriving late, Northern Irish playwright Ruth Davenport (played with exceptional, comic rage and, indeed, violence by Lucianne McEvoy). Between Conway's arrival and Davenport's the playwright sets up gorgeously a comedy of ineffectual English liberalism (Carver), fake political correctness and historical illiteracy (Conway), and well-earned fury (Davenport). Not on-

¹⁸ Ireland, who is originally from Belfast in Northern Ireland, trained as an actor at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) in Glasgow. He received critical acclaim for his 2016 play *Cyprus Avenue*. He continues to work as an actor on stage and screen; in 2014 he gave a particularly notable performance as the titular, psychopathic Ulster Loyalist paramilitary in DC Jackson's play *Kill Johnny Glendening*. He lives in Glasgow.

ly does Conway (who self-identifies as a Catholic Irish-American keen to strike a blow for Irish Republicanism) misunderstand Davenport's drama completely, but he also makes an extremely funny mockery of his professed feminism.

Davenport's religious and political heritage (Protestant and right-of-centre) and her feminine self-respect clash brilliantly with the distinct, and erroneous, political assumptions of the two men. What ensues is, as I observed reviewing the play early in its premiere run, like "a collaboration between a Northern Irish Dario Fo and Quentin Tarantino".¹⁹ This unquestionable Fringe success for the Traverse owes as much to the universally excellent performances and director Gareth Nicholls's fine grasp of the play as to Ireland's outstanding script itself.

Even in the mere quartet of theatre productions selected above we find a fascinating cross-section of the theatrical fare provided in Edinburgh during its famous summer festival seasons. An Irish rendering of a Beckett classic; a French adaptation of Duras; a new, Flemish political monodrama; and a premiere of a blazing, Northern Irish satire: this is Edinburgh festival theatre in its great diversity and internationalism.



Fig. 1. Song of the Goat perform *Lacrimosa*. Photo: Song of the Goat.

¹⁹ *Sunday Herald*, 12 August 2018: scottishstage.wordpress.com/2018/08/19/reviews-edinburgh-festival-2018-august-12/ (Accessed 4 December 2018).



Fig. 2. Marty Rea (Vladimir), left, and Aaron Monaghan (Estragon) in *Waiting For Godot*.
Photo: Matthew Thompson.



Fig. 3. *La Maladie de la mort*. Photo: Stephen Cumiskey.



Fig. 4. Robert Jack, Darrell D'Silva and Lucianne McEvoy in *Ulster American*. Photo: Sid Scott.



Fig. 5. Valentijn Dhaenens in *Unsung*. Photo: Danny Willem.
Photo: Sid Scott attachment management.

