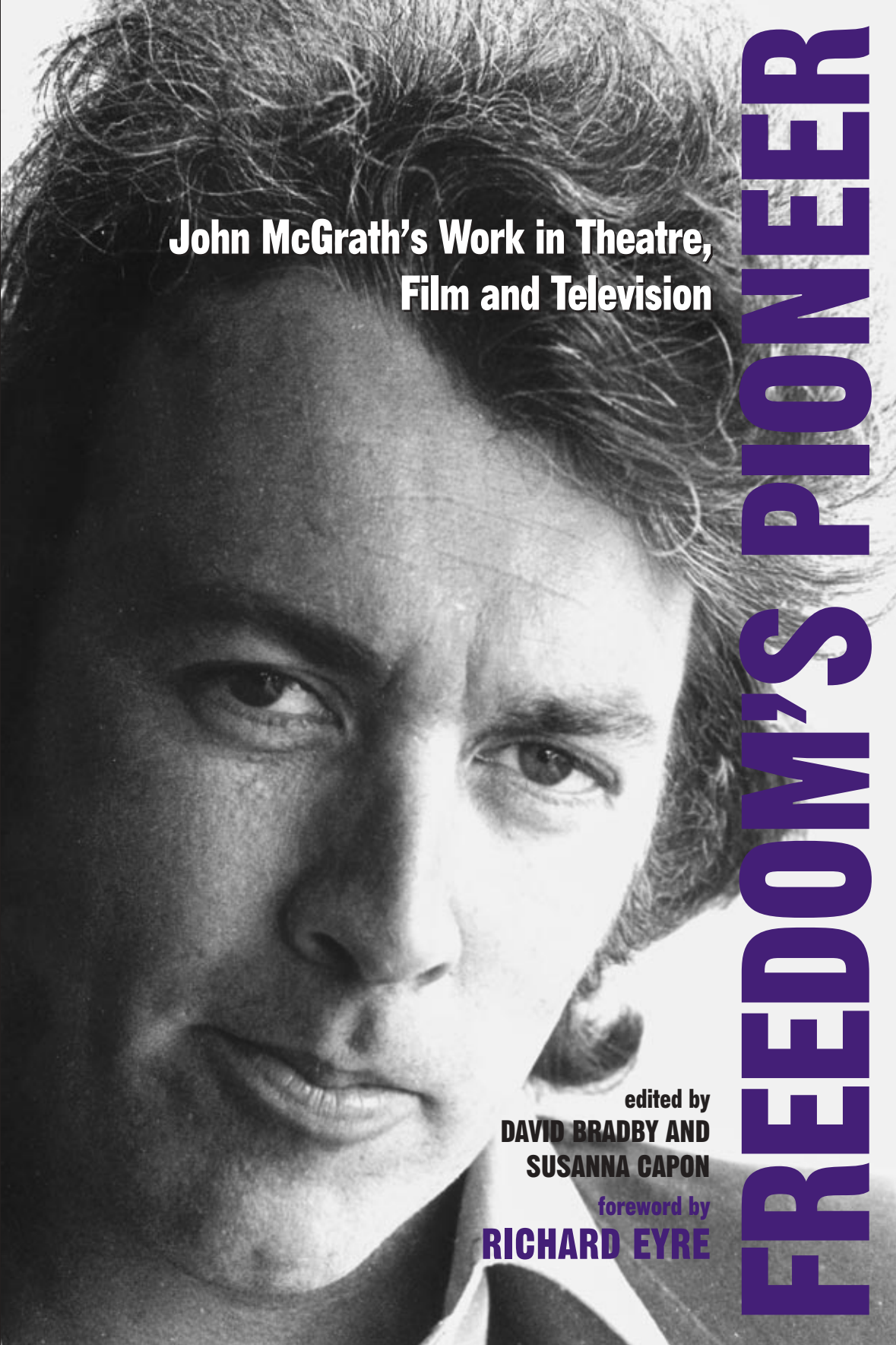

FREEDOM'S PIONEER

John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television

edited by
DAVID BRADBY AND
SUSANNA CAPON

foreword by
RICHARD EYRE

FREEDOM'S PIONEER

John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television

'a gifted, passionate, dogged, sometimes intransigent, eloquent man, who, as well as making us sit up and listen, always wanted—as he so often said—to give us a good night out.'

'[McGrath's plays] combined high ideals, lack of pretension, artistic integrity, political sincerity and commercial success.'

from Richard Eyre's Foreword

Despite recognition of the central importance of John McGrath's work, very little has been written about him. This is the first full-length study of his work and collects together contributions from film and television directors, actors, designers, writers, university researchers and journalists, many of whom worked with McGrath.

Contributors and interviewees

John Bett • Ian Brown • John Bull • John Clifford • Stewart Conn • Robert Dawson Scott • Maria DiCenzo • Richard Eyre • Jack Gold • Stephen Greenhorn • Nadine Holdsworth • Pamela Howard • Troy Kennedy Martin • Stephen Lacey • Liz Lochhead • Tom McGrath • Elizabeth MacLennan • Ros Merkin • Robin Nelson • Bill Paterson • Randall Stevenson • Olga Taxidou • Peter Thomson • Jenny Tiramani

Also published by University of Exeter Press: *John McGrath—Plays for England* selected and introduced by Nadine Holdsworth.

David Bradby is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. **Susanna Capon** has worked as a director for the BBC and as an independent producer; she is now Senior Lecturer in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Peter Thomson, Emeritus Professor of Drama at University of Exeter, has written books on Shakespeare, Brecht and, most recently, for University of Exeter Press, *On Actors and Acting*. He is a research associate of the New Dictionary of National Biography and general editor of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*.

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The conference on which this book was based was planned together with John McGrath and our greatest debt is to him. In his sad absence, we owe enormous thanks to Elizabeth MacLennan, his widow, who has helped us in every way possible at all stages of the planning and production of the book. The photographs throughout the book come from her private collection and we thank her enormously for all her help and kindness.

Many thanks too to Richard Eyre who interrupted a busy rehearsal schedule to give a keynote address at the conference which truly celebrated John. And to all of John's former colleagues who came to the conference to share memories of him and gave their time to be interviewed. We owe a debt of thanks to Christopher Hampton who provided the title of this book, through the poem he wrote for John's memorial evening, and allowed us to use it.

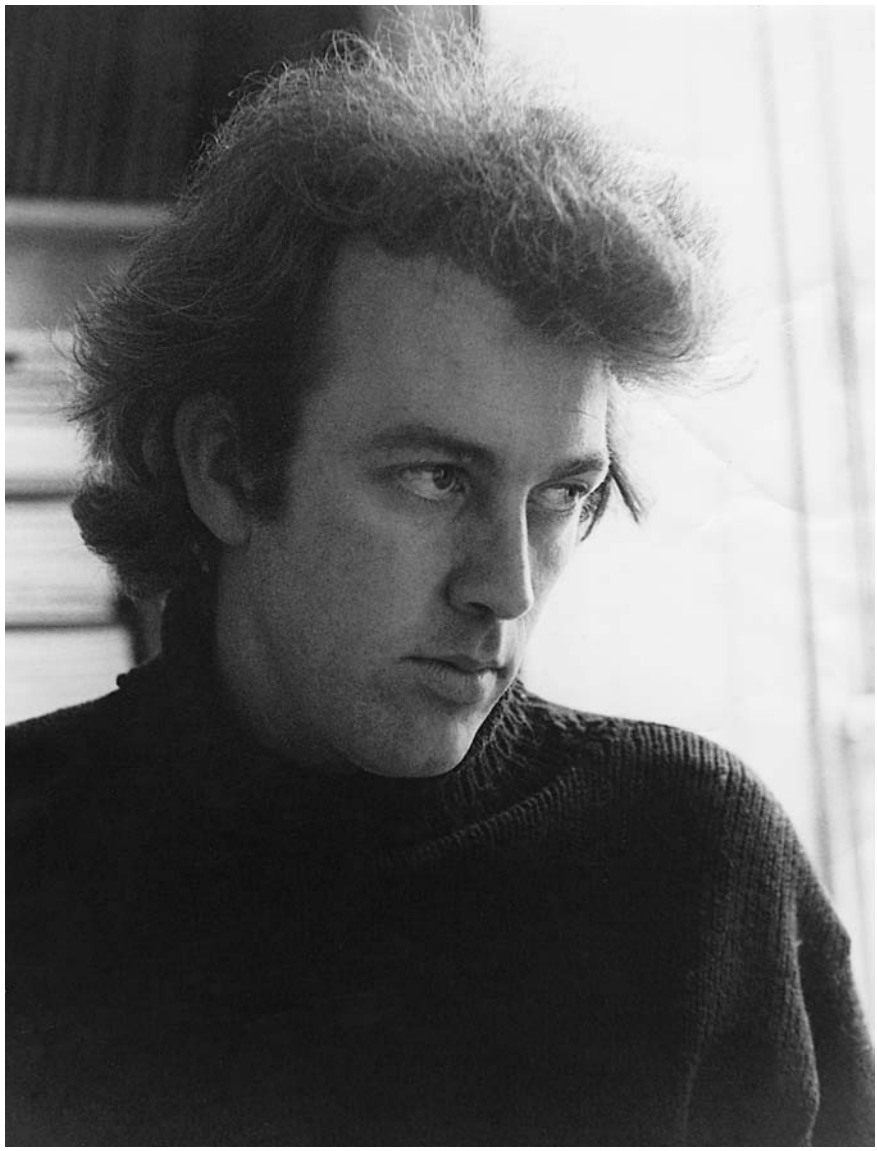
FOREWORD

Richard Eyre

It's probably a bleak admission of character defect to say that few of the important things in my life have happened on my own initiative, but it's true. I've always depended on the kindness of patrons—not financial patrons, but the more important kind, the ones who take an interest in you, the ones who form your taste, who change your way of looking at the world; the ones who sometimes save you from yourself. For some people this figure is a teacher; for some it's a parent; for me one of those people was John McGrath.

I met John, through Liz MacLennan[1], in 1966. What first attracted me to both of them—and it remained so over the years—was not only their commitment to theatre or to radical socialism; it was their glamour. They were both—to borrow the clichés of romantic fiction—dashing and handsome, and when I drove with John in his open-topped Chevrolet Corvette (or could it have been a Ford Mustang?) to Pinewood Studios to visit the giant set for *Doctor No*, it seemed bliss indeed to be alive in his company. At the time John was working for Harry Saltzman[2], writing a successor to *The Ipcress File*[3], and it seemed to me then—and I suppose must have seemed to him—possible to combine a career writing for Hollywood with one hand, while with the other writing provocative left-wing plays for the theatre. But I learned in time by his example that if you believe in a political ideal, it's not enough to state it, you have to live it.

In the first few years I knew John, I learned many of the most important things about the theatre: I learned to recognize what I liked and what I disliked and how to justify my opinion. I learned that theatre should be, as Brecht said, something more than an aid to digestion for the middle classes. I learned to question the Spartan pieties of the Royal Court and doubt the collegiate self-importance of the Royal Shakespeare Company. And I learned from John to turn instinct into conviction, believing that the most exciting work in London was Joan Littlewood's. In *Oh What a Lovely War*[4], which I'd only recently seen, she successfully brought together the traditions of popular entertainment with the aims of propaganda in a show



1. John McGrath at home in 1970.

that was skilful, vulgar, populist and unpatronising. This was political theatre that didn't try to reprimand or reform its audience: it sought to inform and to entertain, and it broke your heart in the process.

John infected me with an appetite for looking at and finding out about what went on in the world. From him I learned to read newspapers carefully. I learned to recognize the power of vested interests—whether they be economic or institutional. I learned to be sceptical of political positions that didn't account for the complexities and ambiguities of humanity, or ideologies that didn't recognize the merciful propensity of human beings to love as well as to hate each other.

Shortly after I met John, I saw his play *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun*[5] at the Hampstead Theatre Club. It was a fine and timely play about conscription and the folly of nuclear defence, which dramatized the dilemma of the liberal conscience. A university-bound corporal on guard in West Germany is stretched on a rack of indecision, powerless and in pain. He fails to deal with a soldier under his command, who is goaded to mutiny and suicide by the debilitating futility of the Cold War. 'I refuse my consent', says the soldier's action, which spoke for a generation of anti-nuclear protesters. It also dramatized the frustrations of John's own position: politically engaged, yet commenting on the sidelines in plays presented to passive audiences in small metropolitan theatres.

I directed this play at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh two years later and then encouraged John to write a play for the Edinburgh Festival. The play was called *Random Happenings in the Hebrides* and you could say, not entirely unfairly, that the title all too aptly resembled the structure of the play, but I was very fond of its rawness and imperfection. It stood clearly in a tradition of theatre with which I still haven't become impatient: a naturalistic play, threaded through with emotional nuance and political debate. It dramatized the tensions between a public world and a private one and its two protagonists embodied the dialectic in John's own personality between the pragmatist and the utopian. It's the utopian's words that I remember now—a drunken schoolmaster in a bar:

> All my life I've told myself I believe in *socialism*—but I don't believe in all this they *tell* me is socialism—the technological revolution, the five per cent growth rate and three per cent mortgage, the national plan and the old age increases—and I don't know what to do with it. I just want people to run their own lives and own their own land and to hell with capitalism. I don't believe in 'pragmatism'.

And increasingly John himself stopped believing in pragmatism. When we talked about another commission, a play about the Highland Clearances and the dissolution of the upper Clyde shipyards, it was clear that he

wanted to change the *way* he made theatre as much as *where* he made theatre. He started to write—very fruitfully—for the Liverpool Everyman and then he married his political convictions with his aesthetic ones and founded the 7:84 Theatre Company. So John and Liz—both descendants of Irish and Scottish peasants, both socialists, both Oxford educated, the one a son of teachers from Birkenhead, the other the daughter of Glasgow doctors—abandoned their conventional careers, set up in Scotland and after years of living a deracinated London life, reclaimed a sense of belonging to somewhere. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I hope it's a history that won't suffer a fate similar to that accorded to the patron saint of 7:84, Joan Littlewood. The orthodox history of British theatre hasn't been generous to her work: it's elevated the ascetic air of the Royal Court and amply chronicled its self-proclaimed legend of a 'writers' theatre' against scant accounts of Littlewood's work. History favours those who write things down. Why are the theories of Brecht and Stanislavsky so remorselessly picked over? Answer: because their ideas were codified and can be studied and set for exams. Littlewood's productions—like the best of 7:84's—defied study: their legend lay in their spontaneity.

7:84's theatrical language was Littlewood's: the language of working-class entertainment—live, spontaneous, musical, highly regionalized, direct in address and in content—a language that is dissolved in the face of the juggernaut of television, special effects and virtual reality.

Like Littlewood's company, 7:84 was founded on these beliefs: that 'excellence' is not an objective conceit and that it doesn't reside exclusively in institutions such as the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company; that the theatre establishment has excluded the working-class audience and working-class culture; that all art (and all funding of art) is political; that art can change the world; and that Margaret Thatcher's dictum that there was no such thing as society was a heartless lie.

In their most successful shows, the aims of the company were utterly vindicated. They combined high ideals, lack of pretension, artistic integrity, political sincerity and commercial success. The company brought together a chaotic patchwork of styles, making a seamless unity without diminishing their individual colours.

Some people might suggest that John McGrath's work was marginal to the artistic and political life of this country. But I believe the opposite: it was at the core of a patchwork of artistic activity that was and still is dotted over the land like sunbursts, little islands of dissent. And 'it is in the archipelago of dissenting islands,' said E.P. Thompson, 'that the only forces are mustered which may at some time liberate the mainland.'

People say about all forms of political theatre that it is 'preaching to the converted'. But who else would you be likely to be addressing? No piece of theatre will change the mind of an Ariel Sharon or a Margaret Thatcher.

The people whose minds can be changed are the people who believe that society is transformable, even if there are wildly different views of how to go about it. I believe that people will continue, like John, to be excited by any theatre that speaks about how we should live our lives. Even Beckett's work gives you hope by saying life is hopeless, because the real hopelessness lies in being silent.

Philip Larkin said famously that 'What survives of us is love.' In that respect John will survive for a long time: you couldn't know him well and not love him well. What will also survive of him is the memory of a gifted, passionate, dogged, sometimes intransigent, eloquent man who, as well as making us sit up and listen, always wanted—as he so often said—to give us a good night out.

I was in New York when I heard about his death and was interviewed about him for a BBC TV programme. 'What will be the loss of John McGrath to the British theatre?' I was asked. 'I don't know if I can speak for the British theatre,' I said, 'but I can speak for myself: I've lost a very good friend. And for that matter so has the British theatre.' John and I didn't always agree over the years. He didn't share many of my enthusiasms and he didn't always approve of what I was doing; but he was never ungenerous in dispute and he was never inconstant in his friendship. I miss my friend, and I'm sad and angry that I can't see him again. But I'm so grateful that I knew him.

Notes

1. Elizabeth MacLennan, actress and writer, John McGrath's wife.
2. Harry Saltzman, Film Producer (1915–94). He founded Woodfall films with Tony Richardson and John Osborne and produced eight Ian Fleming 'James Bond' films with Cubby Broccoli, including *Doctor No*.
3. The Ipcress File (1965) was produced by Harry Saltzman and starred Michael Caine. John McGrath wrote *Billion Dollar Brain* in 1967, the third and last 'Harry Palmer' movie.
4. *Oh What a Lovely War* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 1963). Directed by Joan Littlewood.
5. *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun* (Hampstead Theatre, 1966). Directed by Ronald Eyre.

INTRODUCTION

David Bradby and Susanna Capon

> Injustice was the enemy
> You ridiculed it without fear
> And played the tunes of liberty
> For you were freedom's pioneer
>
> (From *Laeti et Arrabundi. after Verlaine (For John)* by Christopher Hampton.[1])

This poem sums up well the achievement of an exemplary life, a life that this book sets out to celebrate as well as to interrogate. John McGrath's death in January 2002 provoked many people to record their memories of him, memories that were aptly summed up by Nadine Holdsworth, who wrote: 'McGrath and his collaborators in 7:84 took theatre by the scruff of the neck and signalled new ways of generating, executing and disseminating politicised theatre.'[2] This book collects together essays and interviews by a wide spectrum of people, from actors to scholars, all of whom have tried to distil something of his contribution to political thinking and performance in the late twentieth century. Part One begins by examining John McGrath's lifelong commitment to a search for radical alternatives to established cultural practices. His revolutionary socialist vision encompassed every aspect of life; it was not limited to politics understood as a narrow specialist concern, but was always concerned to see how the aspects of our daily lives are infused with and informed by the material conditions of our existence. Maria DiCenzo sets out John's own extremely influential thinking on cultural theory and politics, as expressed in his two books *A Good Night Out* and *The Bone Won't Break*, and points towards the uniquely interdisciplinary quality of John's very thinking, in which politics, culture, performance and image could not be separated, instead feeding back and forth into one another.

The writers of the remaining sections all aim to investigate aspects of John's work that raise questions or challenges. Part Two asks how important his early work for theatre was, work sometimes neglected by those who remember only the well-known highlights of *Z-Cars* and *The*

Cheviot. In addressing the early theatre work, Peter Thomson gives a very personal account of his experience of *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun*. His essay demonstrates Proust's belief that it is by delving most deeply into the individual that the writer can hope to attain truths that are general, by showing how the struggle between Lance-Bombadier Evans and Private O'Rourke enacts an experience of social conflict and opposition to the cold war shared by a whole generation at the end of the 1950s. Ros Merkin shows the importance of John's contribution to the cultural revival of Liverpool at the end of the following decade, and Nadine Holdsworth reminds us of the variety, and the political force of the plays John wrote for 7:84 England which are often overlooked because of the better-known work of 7:84 Scotland.

The question of John's role in the revival of Scottish cultural traditions is addressed in Part Three by Randall Stevenson and Ian Brown. Both show, in their different ways, what an extraordinary catalytic role this non-Scot played in the development, not just of theatre, but also of political thought north of the border. Ian Brown's interviews with five Scottish writers add an important perspective by showing how the surprise and excitement of encountering John's work challenged them to develop original ideas and techniques of their own.

In Part Four, Stephen Lacey investigates the links between structures and meaning in John's work with special reference to *Blood Red Roses*, Robert Dawson Scott explores the power and originality of one of John's last works for television, *The Long Roads*, and Olga Taxidou analyses the remarkable political force packed into the one-woman plays that John wrote for Elizabeth MacLennan. Part Five, entitled 'Working with John', demonstrates John's gift for collaborative work in all three media: theatre, film and television. Troy Kennedy Martin discusses the making of *Z-Cars*, Jack Gold remembers some of John's work in film, the designers Pamela Howard and Jenny Tiramani write of John's remarkable visual imagination, and Bill Paterson and John Bett explain how he interacted with performers. The section concludes with a contribution by Elizabeth MacLennan, in which she meditates on all aspects of John's creative work, stressing the importance of music in every play or script he wrote or directed.

The origin of this book lies in a conference held at Royal Holloway, University of London, in Spring 2002, which set out to create a space for interdisciplinary work, and to attract writers or academics who would be interested in looking beyond their own specialisms in film or theatre or television, in order to learn something from those working in fields different from their own. It is impossible to escape the interdisciplinary dimension of John's work. Having begun in student theatre, he moved to television, then wrote the script for the *Billion Dollar Brain* at the same

time as doing some of his most innovative work in theatre. Following this, he founded 7:84, a company whose extraordinary success with live audiences was followed by national and international recognition as a result of the successful transfer to television of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. In short, he never abandoned one form in favour of another, but moved with great ease across all the varied forms available to him, borrowing cinematic effects for live performances and vice versa. Whilst producing the feature film *Carrington*, for instance, he was still active in small-scale theatre, touring with shows such as *The Last of the MacEachans*.

Almost every one of the actors and other creative artists who worked with him commented on this ability to draw on all sorts of different ideas or techniques, and his gift for inspired lateral thinking. Many of the contributions to this book focus on John's gift for moving across different genres and weaving different materials into his creations. His gift for promoting interactions between designers, actors and writers is chronicled here in the two sets of interviews. Troy Kennedy Martin recalls his innovative approach to television drama, Pamela Howard remembers his 'cross-cutting' solution for how to present in the theatre a scene supposed to be taking place simultaneously inside and outside the Scottish parliament building, John Bull analyses his adaptation of a play by John Arden, and Robin Nelson examines the process involved in adapting *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* for television. The common thread that binds all these examples of cross-fertilization together is the underpinning political theory set out in John's own books and discussed by Maria DiCenzo in Part One.

One of the comments most frequently made about John was that he was a wonderful teacher. *A Good Night Out* and *The Bone Won't Break* both began life as lectures at Cambridge University and it is no surprise that in the last years of his life much of his time was spent organizing and teaching at Moonstone, the training organization for writers and directors that he founded and led. One of John's particular concerns at Moonstone was to open up opportunities for successful theatre directors to work in film, and the cross-disciplinary approach currently producing exciting work by directors such as Sam Mendes and Stephen Daldry coincides closely with his own ethos. The achievement of Moonstone was to bring together in a creative and productive way those who already had experience and could impart it to others (the teachers) and the aspiring practitioners themselves. This interaction between academia and practitioners remains relatively uncharted territory in the new discipline of media studies, and John McGrath remains its foremost champion in his work, both in professional contexts and in universities such as Cambridge and Royal Holloway, University of London.[3]

Notes

1. Written for the programme of the commemorative show *A Good Night Out,* 19 May 2002, in the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, and reproduced by kind permission of the author.
2. Nadine Holdsworth, 'Remembering John McGrath', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 13(1), 2003, p. 114.
3. John McGrath was the first Visiting Professor in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. He was a fount of wisdom in the early years of setting up a media practice course. In recognition of his service to British theatre, film and television, Royal Holloway conferred on him an honorary doctorate of the University of London in 2001.

PART ONE

Culture and the Socialist Vision

CHAPTER ONE

Theatre, Theory and Politics
The Contribution of John McGrath

Maria DiCenzo

> It's always risky for writers to theorize about their work, and it's especially dangerous to do so without benefit of hindsight. The reason why I am embarking on this dangerous project is because I think we in the arts are in the middle of a war which, whether we know it or like it or not, is being fought in the language if not always on the actual terrain of theory, and we've got to get in there and engage.
> (David Edgar, *Festivals of the Oppressed*)[1]

> But outside the university precincts another kind of knowledge-production is going on all the time. I will agree that it is not always rigorous. I am not careless of intellectual values nor unaware of the difficulty of their attainment. But . . . knowledges have been and still are formed outside the academic procedures. Nor have these been, in the test of practice, negligible. They have assisted men and women to till the fields, to construct houses, to support elaborate social organisations, and even, on occasion, to challenge effectively the conclusions of academic thought.
> (E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*)[2]

Randall Stevenson's motif of borders, in his essay for this book, highlights the extent to which John McGrath was writing and producing across borders of many kinds, notably those that exist within the categories of nation, class, gender and media. Often acknowledged, but rarely elaborated, have been McGrath's efforts to negotiate the border between the artistic community and academe. He engaged on the 'terrain of theory' throughout his career as he extrapolated from his own experiments and those of his contemporaries in order to offer explanations, definitions and general principles for a viable and effective socialist theatre. In revisiting these writings, most notably *A Good Night Out* and *The Bone Won't Break*,

I would like to demonstrate why this body of work represents a significant retrospective account of pivotal developments in the arts in post-war Britain, and how it continues to serve as a point of reference informing ongoing debates about political theatre.[3] At the same time, I want to argue that in order to understand the scope of his contribution, it is necessary to situate his analyses of cultural forms and consumption historically and to consider how his hybrid use of genres and the controversial terms of his discourse complicated and limited the academic recognition and reception of this work.

The attempts by playwrights to theorize their own work have proven to be valuable resources in understanding the dynamic qualities of the medium, in part because these documents provide a record of the perceptions, judgements and artistic strategies of practitioners working in a given period. Perhaps the most widely acknowledged example is Bertolt Brecht, whose collected writings have come to represent a body of theory that is relevant to and cited by people who have never read or seen his plays. These writings have a value both because of their historical specificity (as accounts by a contemporary of the characteristics of theatre at a given time and in a given place) and because the artistic strategies he posited proved to be relevant to, and continued to be adapted by, playwrights in a variety of different contexts. It is not a coincidence that politically committed playwrights and directors in post-war Britain have made major contributions in this area.[4] If Brecht is the most obvious example, he is also an exception in so far as his theory has crossed disciplinary boundaries in academic scholarship. It is surprising, and unfortunate, that so much of what we recognize as theory in theatre studies is unknown to those outside the specific field in academe, let alone the larger sphere of social and political debate. The implications of these barriers and separation are particularly revealing when we consider the cultural issues McGrath was addressing in *A Good Night Out* at the end of the 1970s.

A Good Night Out Revisited

McGrath's 1977 article 'TV Drama: The Case Against Naturalism' is an important early example of his tendency to theorize and document his own work. It is based on a lecture he delivered as part of a retrospective look at the television work of James MacTaggart at the 1976 Edinburgh Festival. In it he deals with what it was like to work at the BBC in the early 1960s and provides a context for the experiments in these years, in particular his work with Troy Kennedy Martin, whom he quotes extensively. While he summarizes the issues they were debating at the time, he also formulates his own analysis of the problems of form in television and is adamant in his appeal to others to engage more actively in this process, concluding:

> The answers to these questions [related to why television lags behind theatre and film in debates about form] lie partly in the hands of television executives, who create structures and impose their personalities. They lie mostly in the hands of the writers and directors, who need to acquire the habit of theoretical discussion before churning out yet another ten years of naturalism.[5]

As Jonathon Bignell noted, this essay has assumed an important status in the body of television theory. But in its style and tone, it also points to the more extensive treatment of the production of popular political theatre which McGrath tackled in his Cambridge lectures.

How central *A Good Night Out* has been to an understanding of McGrath's theatre work cannot be overestimated. In the field of theatre studies, the book has had a life of its own, independent of 7:84's work, and is cited or included on university course syllabi more regularly than any of his plays. But for all that analyses of McGrath's theatre practice draw on or take for granted the arguments in *A Good Night Out*, there have been very few attempts to classify or interrogate the book itself. Its value, as well as its peculiar position in the fields of theatre history and theory, stem from the diverse functions the book performs. Over twenty years on, any critical reconsideration of the book must situate it historically in order to understand why it was so groundbreaking and provocative at the time of its publication. But it is equally important to consider what it might mean to readers now, particularly students and young theatre practitioners.

A Good Night Out did after all begin life as a series of lectures to students and faculty at Cambridge University. In his 'Foreword' to the book, Raymond Williams stresses the value of what he terms 'contact between university and profession' while at the same time reinforcing the division and distance between the two spheres of activity. McGrath, on the other hand, complicates these boundaries by engaging in a variety of discourses over the course of the six chapters which make up the book.

In the interests of demonstrating that there are different—and equally legitimate—approaches to mediating reality in the theatre, the first chapter challenges prevailing assumptions about the 'universality' of theatre and its audiences. By offering a materialist analysis of theatre as a social event, McGrath reveals the ways in which the 'meaning, and value, of theatre can clearly change from . . . class to class' and how particular practices 'enshrine certain specific values and qualities of a play above others'.[6] He tries to show how the particular kind of theatre he associates with the Royal Court, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre became 'equally respectable, conventional and pernicious', and locates the formative influences for these mainstream institutions in the decade between 1956 and 1966 at the Royal Court.[7] He focuses on the Royal