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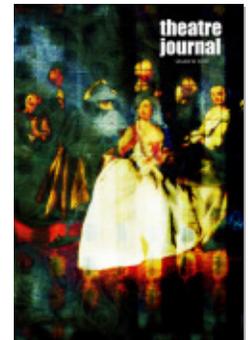
Ciara by David Harrower, and: The Events by David Greig (review)

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CIARA. By David Harrower. Directed by Orla O'Loughlin. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. 7 August 2013.

THE EVENTS. By David Greig. Directed by Ramin Gray. Music composed by John Browne. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. 9 August 2013.

These are dramatic times in Scotland as it grapples with its changing and resurgent cultural identity. The Scots will soon vote in a referendum on political independence from Britain, the culmination of a process that has been building over the past two decades and more. It is a moment of pride and promise, but also of uncertainty and questioning. The desire for political independence is, in many ways, born out of the long-evident strength and distinctiveness of Scottish culture, and the critical reflection of this culture on Scottish stages is moving, with a firm footing in theatrical tradition, in exciting directions. In the wake of a 1997 referendum establishing the Scottish parliament, playwrights David Harrower and David Greig wrote in *The Scotsman* newspaper: "Scotland has voted to redefine itself as a nation. To redefine ourselves we need to understand ourselves, exchange ideas and aspirations, confront enduring myths, expose injustices, and explore our past. The quality, accessibility, and immediacy of Scottish theatre make it one of the best arenas in which these dialogues can take place."

The placement of these two writers' ambitious latest works at the center of the Traverse Theatre's 2013 Fringe Festival, then, can be set within the context of this quest for national dialogue and self-exploration. Part of the impetus for the birth of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1947 was a feeling that the existing Edinburgh International Festival was failing to showcase local talent. The Fringe, in contrast, opened the doors to everyone, fostering the emergence of a lively and innovative Scottish theatre industry that, in turn, provides so much of the atmospheric fuel for the modern Fringe's cultural bonfire, and the Traverse has emerged as the most prominent of the local theatre companies nurturing this growth. The repertory nature of the Traverse's offerings (and much of the Fringe itself) encourages readings across different productions, setting up resonances that might not be visible in the typical theatrical situation of isolated performances, and the Traverse's fiftieth anniversary season epitomized this feel, with a dynamic showcase of new international and Scottish plays in the same space.

David Harrower described his epic solo play *Ciara* (written with this premiere production at the Traverse in mind) as a "twisted love song" to the city of Glasgow. The play explores Glasgow's reputa-



Blythe Duff in *Ciara*. (Photo: Jeremy Abrahams.)

tion as a center for industry, crime, and art. In the same theatre space (Traverse One), David Greig's *The Events* explores the anguish of a minister who has survived a mass shooting in her church hall and now grapples with recurring memories, conflicting testimony, and the possibility of forgiveness. Taken together, *Ciara* and *The Events* are strong examples of the possibilities of putting modern tragedy on the stage. The Traverse's new artistic director, Orla O'Loughlin, explained that one attraction of both of these plays is that they portray strong female protagonists striving for control of their stories and lives. In different ways, *Ciara* and *The Events* show that a contemporary, middle-aged Scottish woman can hold the stage and our catharsis in her hands, her despair, rage, and grief acting on us like a modern-day Phaedra, Antigone, or Medea.

In Harrower's play, veteran Scottish actress Blythe Duff, as *Ciara*, came onstage as if entering a cocktail party; draped in a couture dress and with a glass of wine in hand, she arranged herself on the sole chair and addressed us directly. The canvas that scenic designer Anthony Lambie created for her was a high-ceilinged, derelict industrial warehouse on the brink of gentrification. It is the perfect background for Glasgow's changing face, and a personal liminal space where *Ciara* could reflect on the harshness of the past and design her own future. With tall windows at the back (beautifully lit by designer Philip Gladwell) and a series of columns, it also had the look of an ancient Greek palace. Although the lighting showed the passage of a full day over the course of the play, the design itself suspended *Ciara*, granting her whatever time she needed to tell her story. She looked at once oblivious to the squalor of her surroundings and in complete harmony with it. *Ciara* was a queen living large among the ruins of her city, planning her revenge in its rebirth.

Right from the beginning, her monologue is both delightfully colloquial and ripe with poetry and metaphor. *Ciara* describes a painting of a giant woman



Neve McIntosh and Rudi Dharmalingam in *The Events*. (Photo: Stephen Cummiskey.)

sleeping peacefully on the Glasgow skyline, saying “surely she will awaken soon and when she does you have to wonder . . . you have to engage with the possibilities and repercussions, what does she have in mind for the city and its inhabitants? Does she mean to harm them or want to protect them?” The painting not only becomes integral to the plot, but also a metaphor for Ciara herself; although she is a gangster’s daughter and wife, she is, as director O’Loughlin notes, “not ultimately being victimized by her experience, but surviving in a man’s world and actually proving herself every bit the equal if not the better of the criminal fraternity.”

The locations, references, and language that Ciara uses to tell her story are unashamedly culturally specific, and as a result, it was the most Scottish of the plays that I saw at this year’s Fringe. Many of the jokes rely, for example, upon a working knowledge of the sectarian fan-base of the Glasgow football teams. The dialect and in-jokes were off-putting to some of the London critics, but I found Harrower here to be a masterful storyteller speaking his own language in a way that opened up the experience to all who paid close enough attention. Best known in America for *Blackbird*—his dark, psychological exploration of a young woman confronting the man who had been accused of sexually abusing her as a child—Harrower also possesses a sardonic, world-

weary humor, and both of these elements are on display in *Ciara*. The protagonist’s wry observations of her culturally ignorant husband, for example, give us some welcome comic relief while showing that, like many Northern women, Ciara does not suffer fools gladly. It is clear that both actress Duff and director O’Loughlin share an understanding of Harrower’s storytelling devices, and a commitment to allowing their audience members to experience what the latter described to me as “a more literary, slow-burning narrative line than the usual festival fare.”

While Ciara is allowed to command the stage alone, Claire, the protagonist of Greig’s ambitious new play, has an antagonist and chorus to aid her in her search for reconciliation. *The Events* moves fluidly back and forth in the memory of a liberal church minister as she tries to make sense of a traumatic experience in which a young man burst in and opened fire on her choir during a rehearsal.

Greig was criticized for taking his inspiration from the 2011 mass shooting in Utoya, Norway, especially when it was initially publicized that he was writing a musical (a genre often mis-associated with levity). To some degree, the relocation of the play to a small seaside town in his native Scotland serves to stem calls of appropriation, and the specificity of the locale enables the grief to travel directly from

Claire's mind into our own experiences. At the same time, the Traverse premiere was an international collaboration coproduced by the Norwegian company Brageteatret and Germany's Schauspielhaus Wien, as well as the English Actors Touring Company and the Young Vic Theatre, underscoring the universal resonance of Claire's futile search for answers in the face of the mass shooting that, unfortunately, feels all too relevant across the globe.

The impossibility of Claire's quest for forgiveness was emphasized by deliberate distancing in the dramaturgy and staging choices. Neve McIntosh led as Claire, while Rudi Dharmalingam played all the other roles (from Claire's partner Catriona, to a local politician, to the murderer himself) in a masterly contained performance without changing costume or vocal inflection (sometimes his shift in character happened mid-scene and took a while for audience members to catch up). This disorientation was deliberate, as it became clear that no matter to whom Claire looks to for explanation or comfort, she only and always sees the same face.

An actual local community choir played the role of Claire's church choir, singing musical interludes with scripts in hand. Greig's play specifies some of the music (hymns and popular songs that again locate us in Scotland), but also allows for some of it to be chosen by the featured choir. The effect of having a choir of nonactors onstage was disarming and highlighted at once both the truth of the event and the artifice of our recreation of it. It was both the best example of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* that I have experienced and the purest example of an onstage chorus as the representation of a collective of citizens. We were swept into the emotional harmonies of well-known Christian hymns like "How Great Thou Art," and then promptly pulled out of the action by the choir's clearly unchoreographed movements around the stage and reading of lines. Like the characters played by Dharmalingam, the choir members were often cast randomly and sometimes deliberately playing against gender and racial presentation. They represented the Scottish choir that Claire lost on that fateful day, but they also served as a more universal representation of people who cannot be replaced.

Although vastly different in form and subject, *Ciara* and *The Events* each extended a deeply personal and localized moment so that its effects reverberated. Both stories brought their protagonists on a journey through multiple versions of the past to a place where they had to fight to be able to stand on their own and left them on the brink of this uncertain present moment. While neither refer directly to Scotland's imminent referendum, it is reflected in the question marks with which we are left. The plays

were at once fresh, contemporary pieces grounded in modern Scotland and meditations on the classic and universal themes of theatrical tradition. With several other similarly exciting new plays in development at the Traverse alone, it is no wonder that O'Loughlin has proudly proclaimed this to be a golden age of Scottish playwriting.

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HEAD OF PASSES. By Tarell Alvin McCraney.
Directed by Tina Landau. Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago. 3 May 2013.

The world premiere of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Head of Passes* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company further exemplified the playwright's commitments to exploring the richness of the African American experience through imaginative retellings of classic stories and myths. As with his celebrated trilogy *The Brother/Sister Plays*, which remixes elements of Yoruba cosmology and blends them with an idiom and dramaturgy born from bayou cultures and hip-hop sensibilities, *Head of Passes* again witnessed McCraney synthesizing the old and new to offer a dynamic investigation of the lives of ordinary folk. Moreover, inspired by the biblical Book of Job, the play also witnessed McCraney's continued willingness to stretch the boundaries of theatre through experimentations with form and content.

Head of Passes initially appeared to be a typical American family drama. Set in a once bustling though rapidly sinking house located in the marsh-



Tim Hopper (Doctor Anderson), Ron Cephas Jones (Creaker), James T. Alfred (Spencer), Cheryl Lynn Bruce (Shelah), Jacqueline Williams (Mae), and Glenn Davis (Aubrey) in *Head of Passes*.

(Photo: Michael Brosilow.)