

John Hill

## Towards a Scottish People's Theatre: the Rise and Fall of Glasgow Unity

*In spite of continuing interest in the work of London's Unity Theatre – whose early years were the subject of an article in TQ4 (1971) – its counterpart in Glasgow has been largely neglected by students of popular theatre. Yet the company at its peak of achievement operated its own professional, amateur, and touring groups, and achieved national acclaim with the transfer of The Gorbals Story to the West End of London in 1948. The very success of that production was, however, in part responsible for the company's decline, as its energies became diffused, and its dependence on this and a handful of other past successes increasingly sapped its earlier pioneering strength. John Hill, who is currently with the Department of Sociology at the University of York, has based this first full history of the theatre on his own more detailed dissertation on the subject.*

DUE TO a growing interest in the amateur and 'little' theatre movement in the 1930s, Unity Theatre, London, is now being deservedly subjected to re-evaluation in terms of its contemporary impact and modern significance. Less well documented, however, have been the achievements of the regional theatre groups which emerged under the umbrella of the Unity Theatre Society. Of these, Glasgow Unity Theatre was undoubtedly one of the most important: in size, longevity, and success it was second only to the London company, and as a professional company proved the longest surviving of all.

Yet too closely to identify Glasgow Unity with its London counterpart would be a mistake. For despite its membership of Unity Theatre Society and its numerous links with London, it by and large enjoyed an independent existence which made its achievements notably different from those of London Unity, and the differences were reflected in its policies, both political and artistic, its choice of plays and dramatic conventions, and its development of a theatrical style. Being in Scotland it from the start became embroiled in concerns which could have no meaning for the rest of the Unity movement – that is to say, problems of 'Scottishness', and of what constituted a uniquely Scottish theatre and drama. As such its heritage lay as much in the number of attempts during the century to develop theatrical activity and a native dramatic tradition in Scotland (most notably through the Glasgow Repertory Theatre and the Scottish National Players) as in the working class cultural movements of the 1920s and 1930s, out

of which London Unity had grown.

### A Wartime Birth

Glasgow Unity opened with a production of Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing* on 24 January 1941. The accompanying programme explained its origins and intentions: 'Glasgow Unity Theatre has been formed by the combination of members of various dramatic groups and others interested in the theatre for the purposes of achieving unity of amateur effort in the production of plays and general dramatic entertainment'. Its manifesto declares a firm belief 'in the ability of the theatre to enlighten, encourage, and enthuse the people in the movement towards a fuller and more abundant life'.

The major motivating force was, of course, the war, which made it necessary to combine personnel and resources if living theatre was to survive. But war also brought a political threat which creative work could ignore only at its own peril. Artistic endeavour was thus underwritten by a sense of political purpose – though of a sufficiently wide embrace to allow companies with diverse views to come together.

Five major groups amalgamated to form Glasgow Unity: the Workers Theatre Group, the Clarion Players, the Glasgow Players, the Transport Players, and the Jewish Institute Players, each with its own distinct traditions. The Workers Theatre Group, in their combination of a clear political purpose, directness of technique, and concern with the development of indigenous forms of working class entertainment, came closest to the early

London Unity. The emphasis of their repertoire was on short plays, sketches, living newspapers, and agit-prop, and while they performed their own material, many of their biggest successes were in fact direct borrowings from Unity — most notably Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, Lindsay's *On Guard for Spain*, and Hodges and Roberts's *Where's that Bomb?*

The rest of the group were more closely aligned to the legitimate stage, yet shared something of the WTG's social purpose — offering a broadly 'socialist' if not specifically working-class drama, Ibsen and Shaw being recurrent favourites. The Jewish Players, under the directorship of Avrom Greenbaum, practised a policy of introducing new Jewish drama to Glasgow (and indeed to Britain), and were never afraid to confront the current political problems of their people. Indeed one of the group's most entertaining productions, *Hymn Without Praise*, written by Greenbaum and presented in a double bill with Odets's *Till the Day I Die*, was a mime set to music, which charted the origin and rise of fascism in a European state, and ended with a tableau consisting of a tall, steel-helmeted and black-shirted fascist silhouetted against a map of the world with a group of democratic politicians in shadow on his right and a group of homeless refugees crouching on his left.

In its early stages Glasgow Unity continued to reflect the diversity of its component elements. One section performed full-length plays while an outside show group performed revues, masques, and sketches to troops, hospitals, and trade unions. Much of this effort was in the service of the Soviet Union and the cause of a 'second front' — a notable example being *We Are This Land*, a masque written by members of the group combining poetry with short sketches on the Russian way of life. But the importance of the outside show group was gradually to diminish as many of the people concerned with it left for the war and the larger company's concerns began increasingly to focus on full length plays. A revue section did emerge later to perform some of the tasks previously provided by the outside show group, but hardly with the same political bite.

The reception of *Awake and Sing* was favourable and the group soon followed it with Afinogenov's *Distant Point* — an indication of Unity's determination to stage hitherto unknown works which explored the contemporary world — and, more significantly, *Major Operation* by James Barke, the Scottish novelist and Unity's first chairman. This play was both socialist and Scottish — not only concerning itself with the modern political world but dealing with this concretely through the experience of Clyde shipyard workers.

Utilizing a divided stage, the plot traces the careers of George Anderson, coal agent, and Jock MacKelvie, shipyard worker and militant socialist. George's business and family life are both failing,

while Jock, though unemployed, is happily married and strong in spirit through his beliefs. The two men meet in hospital and George becomes a convert to the cause of the working class. But on discharge he finds himself unable to gain the acceptance of his newly adopted class. In despair he resolves on suicide, only to be redeemed through an heroic intervention in an unemployed march, as a consequence of which he is knocked down and killed.

The play itself suffers from many of the usual problems of didactic realism — the superimposition of ideological correctness upon the action tending to substitute for the genuine exploration and fleshing out of character, and ultimately falsifying the very reality which it is seeking to reveal. But the play's attempt to represent the ordinary, everyday life of Scottish working people — the sort of people Unity was now trying to attract as an audience — did constitute something that was essentially new in the Scottish theatre.

### Securing a Permanent Base

The next few years saw a continuation of the general trend established during this first year: two productions of Odets — *Golden Boy* and *Till the Day I Die* — a second Russian play, Vishnevsky's *Optimistic Tragedy*, and two new Scottish plays. Of these, John Kincaid's *Song of Tomorrow* dealt with a strike of aircraft workers, and Barke's second play, *The Night of the Big Blitz*, proved rather disappointingly to be little more than a re-working of his earlier piece in its 'popular front' theme of two families brought together, despite class barriers, through the marriage of their communist children. First links with O'Casey and the Abbey, with whom the company were increasingly being compared, were also forged with a production of *Juno and the Paycock*.

Until this point the group had worked on a largely ad hoc basis, simply presenting productions when ready. However, the opportunity of renting a theatre, the Athenaeum, on a more permanent basis arose in the spring of 1945, and an increasingly confident Unity resolved to take the theatre for a season, playing every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Club-rooms were also opened and Robert Mitchell, one of the group's three main directors, was appointed full-time director.

The first production was Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, translated by Mitchell into a Scottish idiom, and played without concession to its Russian origin, the actors using their own accents and speech rhythms. 'Audiences only appreciate what they recognize and understand', wrote Mitchell, who also directed the play, 'and striving for foreignness only succeeds in blurring the theme and stultifying the dialogue'. The company's command of the piece was firm and sure, and play and actors merged beautifully to produce a work of force and strength. The play was taken to London in the



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Two productions at the Athenaeum. Top: set for 'Juno and the Paycock', June 1942. Bottom: a scene from the widely acclaimed production of Gorki's 'The Lower Depths', June 1945.

Fair Fortnight of the same year, and performed at London Unity's Goldington Street theatre, where it was well received for its vigour and enthusiasm. *The New Statesman* thought it 'one of the finest (shows) Unity has ever staged', and it was apparently favourably compared by Herbert Marshall to the Moscow Art Theatre's own production.

The Glasgow season continued with Bernard McGinn's *Remembered for Ever*, which introduced to the stage a seventeen-year-old Stanley Baxter in the leading role of Brosnan, in a cast which also included Russell Hunter, Roddy McMillan, and Archie Duncan; a revival of Odets's *Awake and Sing*, and a third play by Barke, *When the Boys Come Home*, again set in a Clydeside shipyard but also managing to involve Karl Marx, Robert Burns, and Rob Roy into its action.

With this growth in activity began to develop a clearer social and artistic policy. The initial impulse had been the necessity for pooling resources to keep theatre going during the war, but in the context of a shared desire 'to attempt to raise amateur standards and status by a serious and critical attitude to their work'. This later became

formulated into the more precise aim of creating a 'Scottish People's Theatre' — though the precise implications of this were not always agreed upon.

*We in Glasgow Unity Theatre are a group of workers interested in the theatre, who intend to put on real plays for the entertainment and education of our fellow workers. Our main purpose is to build a People's Theatre in Glasgow. All our activities are centred on this aim, for we believe that Glasgow has great need for a Real Theatre, where life can be presented and interpreted without prejudice or without being biased by the controlling interests which have so far strangled the professional theatre.*

And though this remained something of a constant in Unity's work, the Scottish nature of the enterprise came to be more and more emphasized: 'Unity aims at a theatre indigenous to the people of Glasgow in particular, and Scotland in general . . . What we try to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the lives of the ordinary people of Scotland.'

This Scottish element implied a particular atti-

tude towards the choice of plays made by the company and the type of company that was to present them. Firstly, it required 'plays which reflect the life and times of the world and country we live in' — which meant mainly new Scottish plays written by Scottish playwrights, but also entailed the production of 'the best drama of all ages' seen 'not as isolated works of art but in the historical perspective of which they are a part . . . (and) . . . reinterpreted in a vital manner'.

### Towards a Group Ideal

The successful performance of such drama required a special type of company:

*Unity believes that a Scottish native theatre can only be built from the flesh and blood of Scottish authors, actors, and producers. That is why we are always on the look out for new Scottish plays and that is why our producers and players are chosen almost exclusively from the ordinary people of Scotland. It is this alone which gives them a vitality as opposed to conventional theatre tricks: it is our proposal to ally to this basic quality the necessary theatre education and training.*

Thus, the Scots quality of an actor was not to be seen as something which the actor spends 'years of his life getting knocked out of him' but an important prerequisite to the development of a style authentically reflecting the life of Scotland. As this effectively required a new type of dramatic training, Unity would have to supply it themselves — a consequence of which, as Mitchell himself pointed out, could well be to create such a distinct school of actors as to make interchange with other theatres virtually impossible.

These ambitions were viewed as being best served by a particular approach to method:

*Unity believes in the group ideal. Each play is thoroughly discussed by the producer and players before it goes on the floor. There are no stars — only co-workers co-operating towards the idea of the production worked out as a collective of which the producer is the leader.*

*The strength of Unity is not due to individual virtuoso acting but to team work. Each member knows exactly what the producer is trying to express in the production and what contribution his role is making to the central theme of the play.*

Much of this philosophy arose naturally out of the group's own unity of purpose, and its social beliefs in community and co-operative production, though debts were acknowledged to Stanislavsky and the work of the American Group Theatre. But theory was applied with a flexibility appropriate to the needs and resources of the company — the 'method' was, after all, by and large intended for professional actors with a skilled control of voice and movement, which many of Unity's company as yet just did not have. Production methods, in-

deed, were not dissimilar from those standard in the rest of the theatre at that time, though Unity was clearly concerned more than most to encourage group discussion and to explicate meaning (in terms of themes and through-lines), a not insignificant contribution in itself.

Yet this would still not entirely account for the impact of the company's work. A key word here is 'vitality', for what the company sometimes lost in experience and technical ability they made up for with the energy and drive of their approach to a play. The attitude of Colin Milne was typical of many of the time:

*There is a tremendous vitality about this group and its courage is also great, in that it does not seem afraid to tackle anything. The fact that it does not always bring off what it attempts in no way daunts it; when it does, the results are very much worthwhile.*

Contributory also was the 'feel' the company evoked of its own time and place — giving rise to a sense of 'belonging' to Glasgow. With Glasgow players performing plays of a content often directly related to Glasgow, to an audience of Glasgow people, it often appeared to take on the qualities of a 'folk theatre' — as Unity set designer Tom McDonald has recently put it.

Here, then, were the ingredients of an incipient Unity style — a sort of Glesca social realism with a dash of romanticism. A hybrid of natural talent, ensemble playing, unashamed Scottishness, and social purpose. This of course had its limitations: the company appeared at its best in plays and roles which came nearest to the actors' own experience, while plays of a more mannered nature could easily elude them, as their encounters with *The Little Foxes* and *The Flowers o' Edinburgh* demonstrated. However, when keeping within the range best suited to them, Unity were possibly unrivalled.

### Success and Self-Confidence

Unity's 1945-46 season began with a revival of *Juno and the Paycock*, followed by Glasgow housewife Ena Lamont Stewart's first play, *Starched Aprons*, a lightweight portrayal of hospital life focussing on a sister's ultimately self-destructive abuse of authority. Often sentimental and lacking in polish, it succeeded through its sincerity and unaffected style, and was generally praised for its 'stamp of authenticity'. It certainly struck a sympathetic chord with its audience, enjoying an extended run of four weeks and a return at the end of the season following a company-organized plebiscite — a combined run which made it the biggest money-spinner of the season.

Sylvia Regan's *Morning Star* came next, and with Christmas Unity's first pantomime, *Hie-de-Pie*. Though drawing on traditional pantomime characters, the production was placed very much

in context and played in broad Glasgow dialect, the hope being that it would provide 'a basis for a real Scottish pantomime which we hope will emerge in future to take the place of the highly sophisticated entertainments that usually hold the stage at this time of the year'.

Success and self confidence were now growing apace and it took only a further three productions before a decision to turn professional was taken. The reasons were fairly clear. The group was performing practically every week and the strain was beginning to tell. Past success indicated a fair chance of future success, and professionalism also provided for many the opportunity to break away from otherwise uninteresting jobs (the company then included a welder, a sausage-factory worker, a telephone operator, a riveter, a hairdresser, and a shorthand typist).

Also contributory was the feeling that the Citizens Theatre was not fulfilling its role as a native theatre, and perhaps the memory of the Scottish National Players' failure to take their chance when it arose in similar circumstances. And, possibly most crucial of all, London Unity had itself set an example and turned professional a month or so earlier. So on 9 April 1946 Unity mounted its first professional production, *Purple Dust*, a play which O'Casey had only allowed to be performed by the group after a year of receiving cuttings and letters about Unity from a persistent Bob Mitchell.

A company of twelve, including administrative and stage staff, was initially established, paid at minimum Equity rates, and drawn entirely from current members of the group — a significant contrast with the Citizens, who on their formation had hired an English director (who on her own admission had only one or two London productions to her credit) and a nucleus of West End actors, such was Bridie and his directorate's fear of the Scottish being associated with the amateur and second rate.

The group was to perform six nights a week plus a Saturday matinee, and plans were laid for a Unity drama school — 'the first drama school in Scotland to be directly attached to and working closely with a live theatre'. This never really came to full fruition, but some significant advances were made through the adoption of an 'apprentice system', whereby an inexperienced actor could join the company at a reduced wage, and through the establishment of classes in voice, movement, and theatre history. Alongside the professional company, an amateur wing was maintained under the direction of Donald McBean, though the company preferred the distinction 'full time' and 'part time', and contact between the two groups was at a maximum. Indeed, Unity's first professional production still contained a large number of 'amateurs', as did many to follow.

A full-scale touring policy was also initiated, a start having been made in February when *Junio*

was taken to Cowglen and Troon. And if a final seal of approval was felt still to be needed, it was to come in May with the announcement that the Arts Council would from then on back the company. This was to represent something of a personal triumph for artistic director Mitchell, who claimed 'Unity is now recognized as a theatre, in the fullest sense of the word'.

### A Formless Masterpiece

Indeed, it was only to be a matter of months before this success seemed to have been crowned in glory with Unity's production of *The Gorbals Story*. For if any single play could be said to have defined Glasgow Unity, it was this — a new Scottish play about working-class people in Glasgow written by a Glasgow playwright, *Bulletin* artist, and Unity member, Robert McLeish, and which attracted that truly popular audience the company had never quite succeeded in bringing into the theatre before. It was their greatest success, their biggest money-maker, and the production most widely toured. But it was also to prove part and parcel of Unity's downfall. For having discovered *The Gorbals Story*, the company was never able to escape from it.

Premiered rather inappropriately in Edinburgh, *The Gorbals Story* subsequently opened at the Queen's Theatre in Glasgow — a former music hall famous for its pantomime, which the company had been obliged to take following a perverse and probably political decision by the Governors of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music refusing Unity the continued use of the Athenaeum. The first night on 2 September 1946 caused a storm, adroit showmanship only serving to add fuel to an already explosive play. While Glasgow's Lord Provost and numerous civic and literary dignitaries sat in the stalls, above them in the circle as guests of honour were a large contingent of squatters from the Glasgow suburbs, whose leader Peter Colin Blair McIntyre was allowed to harangue the audience from the stage before the rise of the curtain. The play made its own bitter comment on the housing situation of the time:

PEGGIE *Ye'd think the Government would dae something about these people — trailin' about lookin' for rooms, I think it must have been the blitz that caused it.*

HECTOR *It was before the blitz — it was bad before the war.*

PEGGIE *It's a funny thing tae me — a' thae sodgers that came here — nane o' them had to go about looking for a room.*

HECTOR *That was different, Peggie.*

PEGGIE *Was it? — the people's war, and only the sodgers get hooses.*

HECTOR (Prepares to wash his face, smiles) *Ye know Peggie, there's always something refreshing*



about a woman's logic.

PEGGIE *That's awld-fashioned patter, Hector — men just talk about logic. They condemn honest folk to live three or four in a room and they gie a burglar a room tae himsel'. Hunners o' sodgers came here frae Canada and Australia an' Poland an' America — what wey can they no fix up their own folk. You mark my words, Hector, aye, you're laughin' — women chained themselves onto lampposts to get the vote. Its coming, you mark my words, some o' these days a woman will chain herself onto an empty house.*

This was a situation of which the audience needed little reminding. Squatting was becoming widespread nationally, and only four days earlier, the story of the eviction of thirty families from a hotel in Glasgow's Charing Cross had hit the headlines — an event in which McIntyre had himself been a participant. It was not surprising that for one observer it was perhaps the nearest Scotland has come to a riotous evening in the Abbey.

The play itself records the action over twenty-four hours in a Gorbals slum kitchen shared by eight families. There is no clear development of a plot — rather, an episodic structure serves to unfold a sense of texture, a feeling for the way a life is lived. Characters come and go, and situations take grip and then slacken, against a backdrop of the cycle of slum life — 'drunkenness, frustration, fights, despair, and humour'.

It was not a great play. Its formlessness gave it an arbitrary quality, it sometimes seemed on the brink of losing direction altogether, there was a tendency to fall back on types and overwork cheap laughs, and the poetic power of an O'Casey or a Chekhov — with whom McLeish was more than once compared — was by and large absent. However, in the hands of the Unity cast — who not only performed the piece with their usual vigour and enthusiasm, but became co-partners in the script, remoulding it to fit better their needs and using it as a basis for flights of improvised dialogue and action — it achieved great impact. 'The Gorbals Story is truth with a sting and a smell, a tragi-comedy coming over the footlights like can after can of rotting garbage', wrote one critic.

The theatre ran to packed houses for five weeks and was only taken off due to a prior commitment to another company. But the play was then toured, and remained in the group's repertoire on and off till the end. As a measure of its success, by April 1947 it was estimated that the play had been seen by over 100,000 people, and by the end of 1946 it had taken £5,800 in box-office drawings — over £4,000 of which was from its Glasgow run.

### Forward to the Festival

The season at the Queens, now required for pantomime, was then completed by the company's third O'Casey play *The Plough and the Stars*, and the

premiere of Robert McClellan's *Torwatletie*, a slightly acid comedy set in the Solway area in 1716, revolving around the attempts of the Laird of Torwatletie to assist a fugitive Jacobite to escape. The company then toured till March — when the Queens would again become available — while the part-time company maintained a Glasgow presence.

The part-time company was in no sense in awe of the full-timers, and carried out an ambitious programme of its own: the British premiere of Paschoal Carlos Magno's *Tomorrow Will Be Different*, Arthur Laurent's *Home of the Brave*, Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, and Ena Lamont Stewart's second play *Men Should Weep*. Set like *The Gorbals Story* in an east-end tenement, this depicted the struggle of a family against the demoralization of poverty and unemployment, focusing in particular on the lot of the slum wife. Though undercut by a tendency towards overstatement and sentiment, it nevertheless contained much of conviction and vigour and provided good material for yet another forceful performance by the company.

The full-time company in the meantime had also premiered a new Scottish play, Scotland's first football play, *Gold in His Boots* by George Munro, an interesting and forthright piece full of promise, attacking the game's ruthlessness and commercialism through its portrayal of the rise to stardom of a working-class lad.

Plans were also being laid for the first Edinburgh Festival, which was planned for August, but which lacked provision for Scottish representation in drama. As far back as January, Unity had called for the inclusion of a Scottish company, thus initiating a heated controversy, but without any alteration in the official position (represented by Rudolf Bing, organizer of the Festival) that no section of the Scottish theatre had attained sufficiently high standards to justify inclusion. Unity were not necessarily concerned to see themselves put forward — they would have been happy with a federated show or a production by the Citizens — but when it became clearer that there would be no official Scottish representation, they decided to go it alone.

The plan was for a three-week season at the Little Theatre, to open a week before the start of the Festival on 18 August with *Starched Aprons*, followed by *Torwatletie* and *The Lower Depths*. However, a last-minute collapse of the whole project was only narrowly avoided, for on 11 August the Arts Council withdrew its patronage. The claim was that this was on account of deteriorating artistic standards, but, as subsequent statements made clear, it was Unity's decision to appear at Edinburgh which was the main bone of contention. 'We can't really approve of their participating in the Festival this year — perhaps next year. They're a nice bunch of people and we're still

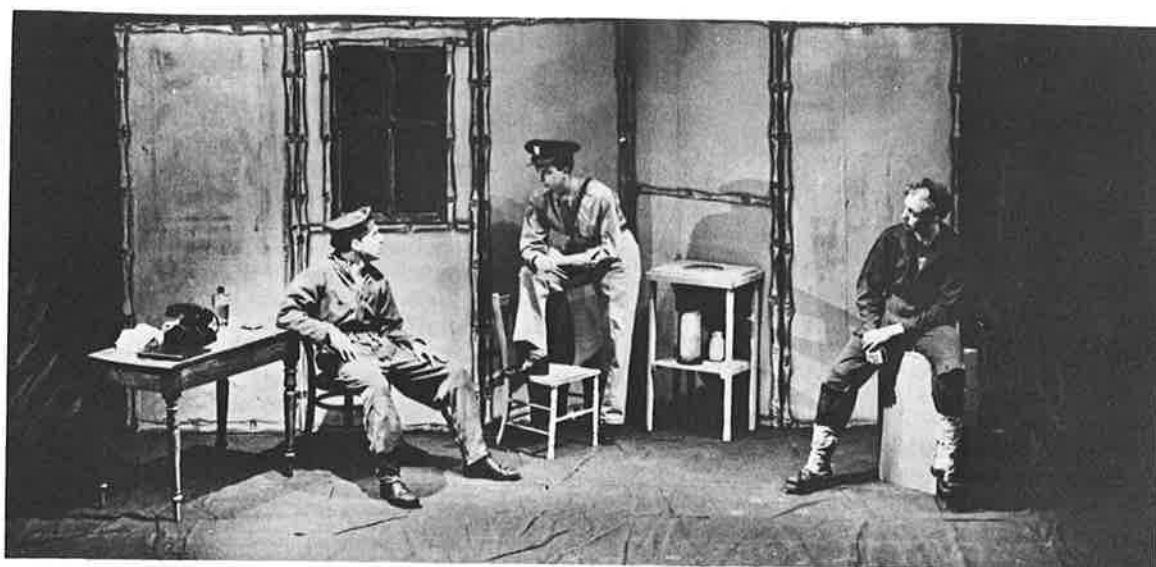
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Three later productions of Glasgow Unity. Top: 'Home of the Brave' at the Athenaeum, January 1947. Middle: 'Starched Aprons' at the Queen's, May 1947. Bottom: 'Men Should Weep' at the Embassy, London, June 1948.

friendly', Stephen Fox, the Arts Council's regional officer, confided in the press.

The ethics behind this decision were no doubt dubious. The Arts Council had been informed of all Unity's plans from the beginning, and had had plenty of time to warn Unity of their disapproval before the group had committed themselves organizationally and financially to the project. In a particularly unenviable position was James Bridie, chairman of the rival Citizens Theatre and member (indeed, ex-chairman) of the Scottish committee of the Arts Council, whose attitude towards Unity was well known to be unfavourable (rather strangely one of his concerns being Unity's very success in gaining a new and popular audience — for they were not true 'lovers of the drama' but more like a 'brake club' or 'Rangers' supporters', who 'might not prove reliable').

In the event, this withdrawal of patronage was probably to prove less disastrous immediately than in the long term, forcing Unity to become increasingly dependent on commercial success — and consequently the performance of *The Gorbals Story*. The loss was of a guarantee rather than a grant, and performances were eventually assured through the intervention of an anonymous businessman with a donation of £800, though the production of *Starched Aprons* had been cancelled in the interim.

The opening of *Torwatletie* on 25 August thus took place in an atmosphere of embattlement: Hugh McDiarmid appeared on stage and denounced the Arts Council decision, calling those who would have denied a Scottish play to the Festival 'cultural quislings'. But ultimately it was the company itself which proved the point. Doubts about standards were soon overturned as the company produced some of its most exhilarating performances to date, which were to draw for it full houses and standing ovations throughout their stay. In a glowing tribute in *Tribune*, Miron Grindea summed up their achievement:

*By a strange set of circumstances, the most significant theatrical event was sponsored by the Glasgow Unity Theatre, which although considered by some people in authority as below international festival standards, was greeted by critics and public alike as the best group of players at the festival. The Glasgow Players, not only presented a Scottish adaption of Gorki's Lower Depths in a perfect realistic style with no pursuit of a supposedly Russian 'atmosphere', but also gave us what nobody else had thought of: a real Scottish play. This was the Laird of Torwatletie, an eighteenth-century pastiche by the young Scottish playwright Robert McLellan. We cannot enumerate the players — all were excellent — but Robert Mitchell, the producer, should be congratulated. On so primitive a stage as that provided by the Pleasance Little Theatre he kept his players acting with natural*

*ease, speed, and sense of humour. This was the only ensemble to provide a typically Scottish and technically perfect show, yet it was officially ignored. This was the one shadow on an otherwise continually successful festival.*

It seemed that the company had earned itself a rightful place alongside the Old Vic and the Compagnie Jovet. Moreover, it had established with the very first festival the phenomena of the 'fringe', which from then on was to grow and grow; and more importantly it had forced the festival's cultural heads to think again. Scottish representation was given full official recognition with the Citizens' production of *The Three Estates* at the next festival, and four other Scottish theatres joined Unity on the 'fringe'. Scottish theatre was no longer afraid to show its face.

### Into the West End

Following the Edinburgh triumph, the two Unity companies now alternated between touring and performing in Glasgow — a state of affairs reflecting the difficulty of finding a permanent home for the group in its native city. The full-time company mainly continued with its past successes, and it was left to the part-timers to continue premiering new Scots plays. Two emerged at this time: Henry Saunders's *Hell and High Water*, concerning a highland seaside village which acquires the trappings of consumerism through the wreck of a ship destined for America and the consequences this has for a religious revival, and Robert McLeish's second play, *A Piece of Milarky*, billed as 'Glasgow Hellzapoppin', but failing to match the success of *The Gorbals Story*.

The following year, 1948, was to prove the turning point for Glasgow Unity. For after an English try-out of *The Gorbals Story* in West Hartlepool in January, Jack Hylton offered the company a London booking at the Garrick — making Unity the first Scottish repertory company to perform a Scottish play in a West End theatre. The play was criticized by some for its apparent formlessness and 'painstaking social realism', but on the whole was enjoyed for its vigour and enthusiastic playing. As *Tribune* put it, 'it was a play of honest coarseness, rich in comic and pathetic incident, a play about urban life in 1948 — and how welcome it is after the elocutions of genteel phantoms from rectories and country houses that people the West End stage'. This view was endorsed by *New Theatre*, which later claimed it to be 'the one really live force that erupted in the London theatre this year'. Audience response was also good, with five curtain calls on the first night, and after a week beset by snow £1200 was taken in the second week.

But this success was not without its irony for a Scottish people's theatre. As the *Socialist Leader* pointed out, 'If . . . you belong to the other half of



the world, you won't be able to afford a seat in any case, but you may have the satisfaction of knowing that a theatre full of people are learning something about it every night'. Circle and stalls alike cost 15/6d which contrasted sharply with Unity's prices in Glasgow which did not rise above 4/6d and began at one shilling. It seemed that while it might still be a play 'performed by people who from their own lives understand the characters they are asked to play' it was doubtful whether it was still playing 'before an audience composed largely of such people', which was the way Unity had initially described the importance of the play.

As the stay became longer, there emerged the basic paradox of a Scottish native theatre residing in London. Unity's business manager, Oscar Lewenstein, claimed that the main purpose of the venture was to build up a prestige company which would reflect to the theatre's advantage on its return to Glasgow: 'Our plans are a little undecided at the moment but you can take it that we have no intention of staying here permanently. Our thoughts always are: how can we build up things in Scotland?'

Not that it was all Unity's fault. Scotland, after all, had failed to provide the company with a theatre and denied it the financial assurances which would have rendered such essentially money making enterprises unnecessary. Ironically, the Arts Council refused a further request from Unity for association on the grounds that it was playing out of Scotland — despite the fact that assistance would have permitted a return to Scotland, and that the company had offered a firm plan for a tour of mining areas, which to its credit it still went ahead with. But the seeds of demise were in the process of being sown. Part of Unity's success was its integration into the Scottish (and especially the Glasgow) environment, and the way it was able to exploit this special relationship. Cut off from its source of strength it began to lose direction.

*The Gorbals Story* ran at the Garrick for six weeks and then transferred to the Embassy, Swiss Cottage (now part of the Central School of Drama), where it was followed by a production of *Starched Aprons* which it was hoped might get the company transferred back to the West End. This was not to be, despite a growing critical respect for the company, and it then embarked upon an English tour before returning to the Embassy for a further six-week season.

The part-time company maintained a Scottish presence until the main company returned to Glasgow in August at the end of another tour. By now its repertoire mainly consisted of the old favourites — *Men Should Weep*, *The Gorbals Story*, and *Torwatletie* — though one new discovery was made with Benedict Scott's *The Lambs of God*, a sensitive and often poetic treatment of homosexuality

in a 1930s slum. Unfortunately Unity could not match the courage of its choice in execution, and for once the group's spirit was dampened by the weight of its embarrassment.

### The Company in Decline

The company then moved to Edinburgh for the end of the Festival where it premiered a second play by Robert McLellan, *The Flowers o' Edinburgh*, an amusing if not very substantial piece set in the eighteenth century, and dealing with the Scots gentry's dilemma in deciding whether to speak English or Scots. It seems it was not a piece to which the company was well suited, and with a failure to draw good audiences the theatre was finding it increasingly difficult to keep going. Touring was resumed, but members soon began to leave, coming back only for special productions.

A production of *Sweeney Todd* emerged at the Queens in April 1949, while in July a revival of *The Lambs of God* (under its new title of *This Walking Shadow*) was mounted in London, at the Playhouse. This year also saw the making of a film of *The Gorbals Story*, which was released in January 1950. In September, Bob Mitchell and Evie Garratt of Unity joined forces with Anthony Hawtry of the Embassy to form Envoy Productions, mounting a production of *Morning Star*, now retitled *The Golden Door*, which ran for sixteen weeks and made a profit of £3500, but ironically did not feature any Unity members except for Evie Garratt.

A production of James Forsyth's *The Medicine Man* was later mounted by Envoy with a largely Unity cast. However, it did not hold the company together: a few returned to Scotland to join the part-timers in another production of *The Gorbals Story*, while Envoy continued with only the remotest of connections with Unity, itself discontinuing operations in 1951. Back in Glasgow the part-timers were soon to suffer a similar fate, staging sporadic performances before finally disappearing in with debts unsettled.

Yet Unity did not go without its triumphs. Its credits greatly outweighed its debits and its loss is one that is only now beginning to be recognized — in the wave of concern for Scottish theatre and the emergence of new Scottish playwrights. Its primary achievement lay simply in what it was — a vital, native theatre built on the natural talent of its members. Initially untutored and lacking the higher skills, the conviction and vigour they brought to their work still produced a theatrical experience of rare force.

It drew on the ordinary people of Glasgow and was remarkable in its discovery of new talent. Roddy McMillan, Russell Hunter, Archie Duncan, Stanley Baxter, and Andrew Keir were all associated with Unity to varying degrees. Others such as

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Marjorie Thomson, Betty Henderson, Ida Schuster, Edith Ruddick, Eveline Garratt, and Sam Hankin work professionally to this day, as does Tom McDonald, while Ian Dalgliesh and Jimmy Sutherland are television producers and Eddie Boyd a television scriptwriter. And it is to Unity that most must credit their initial opportunities.

### **Record and Retrospect**

Unity similarly provided a home for new Scottish writers. Although recognizing the inferior quality of some of the work it produced, it still saw the need to encourage native dramatic activity. With the exception of Barke, whose strength largely lay in the novel to which he returned, few advanced beyond a second play, but, as it was, Unity did at least discover plays of by no means negligible merit, which would probably not have emerged at all in their absence.

Moreover, the plays themselves represented something of a breakthrough in Scottish drama, being some of the first to attempt to come to terms with contemporary Scottish experience and to move beyond the romantic, idyllic, or comic view of Scotland so persistently portrayed by its native drama. Unlike the Scottish National Players' rural and historical visions, Barrie's 'pastoral prettiness', and Bridie's world of the Glasgow middle class, Unity's drama was alone in the century in presenting the lowland urban experience of Scotland as lived by most of its audiences.

And accompanying this new drama came a new style of acting owing as much to the life around it as it did to traditional dramatic technique. Founded on natural talent, it drew upon the actor's own experience of the world he presented to convey authentically the feel of contemporary Scotland. It was an acting style not born of any drama school, and one of Unity's specific contributions to the theatre.

In many ways Unity's struggle for a new form of realism in the Scottish theatre was not too far removed from the conflict in the English theatre a decade later. Symbolically, a kitchen sink actually formed part of the set of *Men Should Weep*. Of course the parallel is not without its imprecision, and to some extent obscures the very real difference in dynamic behind the two movements. The 'new wave' of the 1950s led to a range of experimentation unable to be contained within the conventions of realism. Unity was not unaware of the possibilities which formal experiment held for the expression of significant experience — the company was particularly impressed by the work of Theatre Workshop, who played in Glasgow under its auspices, but it was not technically equipped to make any extensive use of such acquaintances. Yet whatever its limitations, within its chosen medium, Unity's achievement remains considerable, and deserves a recognition that is so far long overdue.

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