7 'Scotland doesna mean much tae Glesca': Some Notes on *The* Gorbals Story

JOHN HILL

If the representation of the Scots on the screen has been characteristically defined by the traditions of Kailyard and Tartanry it's probably a characteristic irony that one of the few attempts to break with such traditions should have been made in England and at a time when its progenitors were on the verge of dispersal. Such was the case of *The Gorbals Story*. Shot in 1949 at Merton Park Studios, London, and released (somewhat patchily) in 1950, it was to prove less of a prospectus for the future than a more or less fitting epitaph for one of Scotland's boldest theatrical experiments, that of Glasgow Unity Theatre.

It was during the Second World War that Glasgow Unity had emerged, when the economic necessity of pooling resources and an ethos of popular front collaboration had led to an amalgamation of Glasgow's leading left-wing theatre groups in 1940. As the choice of title would suggest, the impulse was also to forge a link with London Unity, whose project of a politicised working-class theatre was already yielding significant results. Yet the identification of the two Unitys should not be taken too far. For crucial to the development of Glasgow Unity were questions which by their very nature could have no meaning for the rest of the Unity movement — that is to say, questions of how to forge a 'Scottish' identity, and produce work which was not only socialist but specifically Scottish as well.

The formulation that emerged was that of a 'Scottish People's Theatre'. As the leading Unity producer put it, 'What we are trying to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the lives of the ordinary people of Scotland.' In terms of productions this had two effects. First, an appropriation of the 'best' of broadly socialist drama (Ibsen, Gorky, O'Casey, Odets) 'seen not as isolated works of art but in the historical perspective of which they are part'. Second, and most importantly, the production of new Scottish plays written by new Scottish playwrights. Although I have noted elsewhere the ambivalence which was subsequently to emerge in Unity's thinking about the type of Scottish play it should be encouraging, the initial direction is at least

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For crucial to Glasgow Unity's development was the determination to come to terms with the contemporary Scottish experience of the urban lowlands. With the exception of Joe Corrie, Scots drama (where it had achieved an identity at all) had singularly failed to engage with this experience. Both previous attempts to found a national theatre and accompanying drama - the Glasgow Repertory Company (1909) and the Scottish National Players (1921) - had invariably opted for historical and/or rural settings (usually some 'unspoilt Highland paradise') cemented together by some reactionary-mystical ideology of reaching the 'national soul' through the 'peasant or rural character'. 5 By contrast, Unity sought to bring the city, the factory, and the slum vividly centre stage and address itself directly to the material problems and social relations of contemporary capitalism. Unity's first new play, then, was appropriately James Barke's Major Operation (1941) which set itself firmly in the shipyards of the Clyde and attempted a dramatic working out of popular front policy through its bringing together of militant worker and middle-class ally. And this was to be succeeded by others of a similar ilk. Three more plays, indeed, by Barke himself: The Night of the Blitz (1944), When the Boys Come Home (1945), and Her Name Was Barbara Allen (1946); John Kincaid's treatment of striking aircraft workers, Song of Tomorrow (1943); Ena Lamont Stewart's observations of Glasgow life, Starched Aprons (1945) and Men Should Weep (1947); and George Munro's exposure of a young Scottish footballer destroyed by commercialism, Gold in His Boots (1947).6

But without doubt it was *The Gorbals Story* (1946) which most clearly represented Glasgow Unity's concerns. It was their biggest success, their biggest money-maker and most-toured production. It fitted the bill of being both Scottish and working-class and was penned by a native Glaswegian, *Bulletin* artist and Unity member, Robert McLeish. It captured a large and enthusiastic working-class audience and intervened directly in the contemporary problem of homelessness. Indeed, at its Glasgow première (2 September 1946), squatters' leader P.C.B. McIntyre was allowed on stage to harangue the assembled audience, which included squatters and their supporters, who sat as guests of honour in the circle while Glasgow's Lord Provost and other civic dignitaries

squeezed uncomfortably together in the stalls.

Yet in the end *The Gorbals Story* was to prove something of a false friend. Earlier in 1946 the company had turned professional and when times got hard a production of the play became the inevitable fall-back. Moreover, the increasing need for commercial security was in turn destined to lead the company and *The Gorbals Story* south to England. Not that Unity could be held solely to blame. Inevitably, during their career they had faced the suspicion and indeed downright hostility of institutional authority. The governors of the Royal Scottish Academy of

Music denied them a permanent home in the Athenaeum, the Arts Council withdrew its financial support under the most dubious of circumstances, while as late as March 1948 (when most of Unity's more agitational activities had long since ceased) fear of 'Communist domination' induced Ayreshire County Council to prevent them from playing to schools. Under such circumstances, it was difficult not to accept a West End run at the Garrick. And yet, while it may have made temporary commercial sense, for a 'Scottish People's Theatre' to try and make its way in the London West End was clearly a nonsense. By 1951 Glasgow Unity had all but vanished.⁷

However, the foray into London did have one lasting consequence, the production of a film. Spotted at the Garrick by the Hyams Brothers, Phil and Sid, the play was put into production by their film company, Eros, employing Scotsman David MacKane to script from McLeish's original and direct. Encouragingly received in the trade press, a general release nonetheless proved elusive and commercially and critically the

film sank without trace.

In many ways the commercial and critical failure went together. The contemporary trade press reviews reveal not only an uncertainty as to how the film might be sold (Today's Cinema (12 January 1950) makes the rather ironic suggestion of an appeal to an 'intelligent patronage') but also an uncertainty as to just what it is that's to be sold in the first place. The Kinematograph Weekly review (19 January 1950) is instructive in this respect. For the film is not only 'squalid' and 'sordid' but also 'romantic'; not only 'propaganda' but 'thoughtful'; 'regional' yet 'intensely human'; an 'impressive British problem vehicle' and a 'melodrama'. What seems strikingly absent is any certainty over what sort of critical vocabulary could or should be used. The British cinema's vogue for working-class realism is still a long way off while the film's 'Scottishness' seems to make it something of a one-off eccentricity in no way expressive of any broader social or cultural dynamic.

So the 'recovery' of *The Gorbals Story* is not just about showing what Glasgow Unity were like (instructive though that may be) nor merely reversing the terms of conventional film historiography by demanding the inclusion of a hitherto neglected 'masterpiece' (which on any grounds the film is far from being). The appropriate terminology is probably 're-insertion' rather than 'recovery': the re-insertion of the film back into a context and back into a critical perspective. To bother to do that at all is clearly to signal the film as in some way 'important' but it's also to suggest that as an example from the past it's not there simply to be celebrated or imitated but rather to be interrogated in such a way as to give it a use-value for the present. What seems 'important', then, about *The Gorbals Story* and worth exploring further is its essentially 'progressive' attempt to establish an oppositional modality to the dominant cultural traditions of Kailyard and Tartanry. But what, on the

other hand, seems to limit and of aesthetic devices which areas of experience but work reactionary.

In many ways the terms signalled and structured into introduced to the artist John Glasgow. Over shots of Sau centre hotel and restaurar Museum, he describes: 'A ci big hotels, comfortable resta short a successful city . . . a bridge over the Clyde, follow ensue while he continues: 'B portray lies on the other sid The Glasgow of grey skies streets in which passers-by course leading through the end.' Just as so many Unity p Scottish experience in reladramatic and ideological a the shops and finer achieve the other, the poverty and

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In many ways the terms of the film's 'oppositional modality' are signalled and structured into the opening of the film itself when we are introduced to the artist Johnnie Martin (Russell Hunter) reflecting upon Glasgow. Over shots of Sauchiehall Street, St. Enoch's Square, a city centre hotel and restaurant, Kelvingrove Park, the University and Museum, he describes: 'A city of well-stocked shops and spacious stores, big hotels, comfortable restaurants, fine theatres, luxurious cinemas. In short a successful city . . . a city to be proud of. A shot moving across a bridge over the Clyde, followed by various shots of the South Side, then ensue while he continues: 'But strangely enough the Glasgow I generally portray lies on the other side of the slow-flowing waters of the Clyde. The Glasgow of grey skies, grey buildings, depression, frustration, streets in which passers-by walk grimly on their predestined course. A course leading through the darkness of poverty to an almost inevitable end.' Just as so many Unity plays had sought to define the contemporary Scottish experience in relation to the Clyde, so it becomes a crucial dramatic and ideological axis for The Gorbals Story. On its one side, the shops and finer achievements of the city centre and West End; on the other, the poverty and depression of the South Side.

This opposition in fact represents something of a shift from the original play, which is more conventionally marked by its hostility to Kailyard and Tartanry. Peggy, for example, is allowed to make scathing comment on 'yon pictures o' short-bread - big blue hills and coos that need a haircut' as well as Scottish nationalists wearing a kilt and 'staunin' up like William Wallace', by way of a conclusion that 'Scotland doesna mean much tae Glesca folk'. Hector's departure from the Highlands some twenty years before is likewise emphasized, while songs such as 'My Ain Wee Hoose' and 'The Banks of Loch Lomond' are used as dramatic counterpoint to the realities of Glasgow slum life. The irrelevance of rural values to urban Glasgow is clearly implicit in the film (with a portrait of Burns and pictures of a young couple looking across a gate at a 'coo that needs a haircut' in part carrying on the ironic function of the songs) but why the film seeks to make its main opposition interior to Glasgow is probably to be understood in terms of the role played by Johnny as the artist, a point to which I shall return later.

The impulse of the film, then, is to 'reveal' this 'other' Glasgow on the South Side of the Clyde, hitherto undignified by cinematic representation. But, more than this, it is also to do so in a way that will provide something of a novel form to match the novelty of its contents (the working class, the slum). The thrust here then is towards naturalism, towards a minimisation of dramaturgy in pursuit of a more 'authentic' evocation

of the 'non-dramatic' tempo of everyday living. Two main effects become notable.

First, there is a supplanting of conventional sequential narrative structure by one which is loosely episodic and in which there is a minimal accumulation of significance about characters and events. Characters come and go, events take place and are forgotten, what we know at the beginning is not greatly enlarged by what we know at the end (in turn the effect of an absence of mystery, quest or motivation which it is the work of the narrative to fulfil). In many ways, the principle of presentation/revelation becomes an end in itself. Roland Barthes has discussed the role of objects and events in a fiction which seem bereft of any function (in terms of narrative information or character insight) other than their 'effect of the real', their signification that 'we are reality'. 8 And so much of The Gorbals Story seems to revel in such a 'reality-display'. The display of Hector (Roddy McMillan), for example, cleaning his boots and then washing his 'smalls' in the sink provides neither insight into his character nor narrative information we would not have otherwise. Its function seems solely to provide an expansion of our sense of what is proper and appropriate to be on the screen and in so doing intimate a message about itself as an 'authentic' reality whose mere presentation is its own justification.

The second main effect, and again part and parcel of the film's pursuit of naturalistic fidelity, is its abandonment of a central hero and corresponding multiplication of leading dramatis personae (although the story is ostensibly Johnny's flashback it is a flashback which repeatedly forgets him and takes itself out of his 'control'). In part this helps produce the beginnings of a collectivist ideology whereby mutual support and aid predominate over individual self-fulfilment and selfadvancement. But, even more markedly, it helps establish a quite vivid expansion of what we might call the domestic or private sphere. Raymond Williams has noted how important in theatrical history was the development of the stage as a room. This impulse, he argues, derived not only from a scientific insistence on the intimate relationship between character and environment, but a crucial refocusing of the central site of human action - that of the bourgeois family's private domestic room. 'This is the life of the bourgeois family, where the important things occur in that kind of family room'. 9 What seems so striking about The Gorbals Story is how it appropriates that domestic sphere but in a way which completely explodes the inwardness and isolation of the bourgeois family drama. The families in The Gorbals Story have no exclusive control over their domestic space and their relations with the other characters are left quite confusingly vague. The home, indeed, becomes open to all comers such that when Wullie (Howard Connell) announces the details of his winning coupon it serves as the cue for what seems to be the entire cast to find their way into his bedroom. It might be argued that the thru deed, the search for a partial film is all about. But it is the opposite, a wide consists in and an unfamily drama.

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be argued that the thrust of such a strategy is precisely negative. It is, indeed, the search for a private space — 'a home of our own' — which the film is all about. But in the process of working itself out the momentum is the opposite, a widening of our sense of what the home and family consists in and an undermining of the 'privatisation' implicit in the family drama.

But that said it should nonetheless be recognised that the sphere of domesticity still remains the film's limits. For what seems to disable above all the film's attempt to project the working class on to the screen is the systematic absence of work and politics and a sense of structural as opposed to inter-personal social relations. As has been already noted, while the film initially locates itself in relation to the Clyde, it does so in a way that crucially omits what the other Unity plays and a film like Floodtide made central: shipbuilding and industrial labour. Only two characters in The Gorbals Story are indicated as in any way working (and in the case of Wullie, the emphasis is exactly opposite) and even these are in occupations marginal to the industrial system (baker and usherette). Likewise with politics: while the play addressed itself directly to the post-war housing shortage and the accompanying disillusionment with the promised 'homes fit for heroes', the film chooses to diminish these in a way which makes the housing problem diffuse and unspecific. Thus when a homeless couple appear on the screen in search of



Undermining the privacy of family melodrama: The Gorbals Story

somewhere to stay it merely serves to signify a distress without any particular socio-political reference.

Alongside this suppression of political reference the film also succeeds in removing a number of interesting tensions that occasionally surface in the play: sexism (Peggie's complaints that 'This is a man's world'); racism (Ahmed's retort that 'Glasgow is white man's country') and religious sectarianism (Peggie's attack on Mrs Reilly's 'blasted papish way of looking at things'). And although the film does take on the play's theme of miscegenation it does so in a way that is completely untroubled. Indeed, insofar as the film signifies cultural and ethnic difference at all, it's really only to go on and deny it under an umbrella of universalised humanism ('We may be of different races, religions, sexes, but here in the Gorbals we're all the same').

Indeed, it is possible to go further and argue that not only does the film evacuate socio-historical specifics, but it does so in a way that makes the meanings it projects quite straightforwardly asocial. Thus it's not only that poverty and depression are denied any relationship with exterior economic and political structures; in the way they are represented they effectively become a fate or destiny which the working class can only passively bear (a theme indeed made explicit by Johnny's opening remarks).

Two aesthetic strategies enforce this. First is the stylistic emphasis on



Miscegenation in The Gorbals Story

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enclosure deriving from the central role of domestic interiors. Few of the characters are seen to leave the tenement, the outside becoming for them merely that which lies beyond the window. Indeed, at one point we hear the voices of children shouting for Peggie (Betty Henderson). The camera then takes us outside but not to reveal the children (who remain off screen) but rather Peggie remaining fixedly inside and framed by the window through which she's talking. Of course much of this has to do with the obvious low budget under which the film was made but the point then to note is how such economic stringency has the aesthetic effect of producing a sort of minimalism which in many ways undercuts the film's attempted naturalism and helps reinforce the abstracted and de-contextualised nature of the drama. This move towards abstraction is particularly pronounced with Johnny's visit to the dance-hall and pub ('The Green Tartan'!) with its almost 'noir' deployment of shadow, offbalanced composition and blurred focus. Similarly, with Hector and Wullie's own visit to the pub, in which background is removed altogether and two large beer glasses are superimposed upon the two men drinking. In such a context, then, drink takes on the dimensions of a fatal lure which both reinforces the film's message about the impossibility of its characters' 'escape' and further assists the removal of social and economic reference from their problems. And when we do



'The Green Tartan with its almost "noir" deployment of shadow, off-balanced composition and blurred focus': The Gorbals Story

follow a character into the outside world it hardly becomes an 'escape'. For Johnny it becomes a world of humiliation (the dance-hall) and demoralising drunkenness or, for Wullie and Hector, demoralising drunkenness and violence.

And this very impossibility of 'escape' seems further enforced by the film's overall structure. It has been already noted how the plot avoids the development structure of classical narrative. If anything its modus operandi is cyclical rather than linear. Rather than development (the achievement of ends) the film emphasizes repetition (the non-achievement of ends). Thus, the winning coupon which Wullie failed to send off both stylistically (in its repetition of camera set-ups) and thematically (his being doomed to failure) reproduces a message of a world from which there's no way out. And, in a sense, this adds a new dimension to the film's presentation of 'unmotivated' actions. For in a world where nothing can be done, no one action or event can assume a significance over another (cleaning boots is no more or less important than proposing a marriage).

However, there is an important exception to this overall drift. And this is provided by the flashback structure which the film has employed to frame the main drama (and which is an addition to the original play). As noted, the film begins with Johnny in his studio. He has now crossed the river to the West End and become a successful artist. Two



'Demoralising drunkenness and violence': The Gorbals Story

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effects ensue immediately. First there's a distanciation from the contemporaneity of the drama. It is now Johnny's past and although the film is not explicit about it, the very logic of the structure does tend to suggest a characteristic split between the 'bad old days' and the present, when success has been achieved and conditions ameliorated. Second, it helps enforce the decontextualised nature of slum life. For the story now in part becomes Johnny's reverie and the fuel for his artistic imagination — 'the characters who filled my canvas then', as Johnny himself puts it.

But most crucially what the flashback/voice-over structure inserts is a linear dynamic which cuts across the circularity of the rest of the film. Unlike the play where Johnny neither leaves the Gorbals nor is seen to achieve his ambitions to be an artist, the film does seek to dramatise the process and achievement of Johnny's ends. It can only do so, however, by mobilising an ideology of art, whereby Johnny becomes the exceptional individual whose artistic development necessarily requires a social isolation. Johnny can't escape as part of a class, only as an individual endowed with special 'gifts' (the most obvious trait which the film allows being his 'poeticised' discourse which stands in sharp contrast to the more colloquial dialogue of his colleagues). It's a position very close to that of Young Cassidy in its treatment of the life of Sean O'Casey. Just as in that film the development of the artist requires a divorce from family, class and nation, so Johnny's advance is predicated upon an 'escape' from his class background. Far from existing in any dynamic or organic relationship with his class, his art can only thrive on separation. We can now see why it is entirely appropriate for Johnny's opening description of Glasgow to omit all reference to class and industry. For in terms of Johnny's development as an artist, they have now become irrelevant. And this in turn links up with how the film also manages to displace so many of its concerns onto questions of Johnny's sexuality. For what essentially propels his story forward is the state of his relations with women: his initial humiliation in front of Nora (Isobel Campbell) at the hands of her father; his subsequent rejection by a girl at the dance-hall; and his final (almost oedipal) attempt at the seduction of Peggie. His struggle to escape from the Gorbals then not only becomes an individualistic quest for artistic success but also sexual fulfilment and, indeed, a 'coming to manhood'. The only (unintentional) irony the film then allows is the mise en scène of its beginning whereby Johnny, the mature man and artist, is placed entirely alone in a large and comfortless room staring out through a window to a distant Glasgow beyond.

In effect, then, what seems to happen in the film is the production of an ideology of individual self-achievement (in the form of that most 'individual' of creatures: the 'artist') set against a message of collective passivity whereby the working-class characters can only exist as the fated bearers of a socially and historically de-contextualised 'poverty, hunger,

frustration, depression'. In this respect, Helen Biggar and Norman McLaren's short film of 1936, Hell Unlimited, provides a salutary contrast. For what is absent in The Gorbals Story - work, politics, structural relations - is most strikingly present in the other. Moreover, the emphasis is on the possibility - indeed crucial centrality - of collective action in the changing of social conditions. Now this contrast is clearly not entirely appropriate. Hell Unlimited has a direct agitational intent, whose model is of limited applicability. But what is does raise clearly is the question of how far particular aesthetic methods are appropriate to the achievement of particular ideological ends. The failure of The Gorbals Story to present a sense of structural relations and/or collectivised political action was in many ways not that of individual intention (which was probably highly creditable) or bad faith but the complex result of its choice of a naturalist (and in part classical narrative) aesthetic. By contrast Hell Unlimited's ability to deal with class and politics was dependent heavily on a break with such an aesthetic and a dizzily courageous attempt to fuse drama, documentary and animation. So before the 'look back' to the thirties and forties produces a new urbanindustrial 'Kailyardry' it might just be such a moral that Scots film and drama should be considering.

Notes

1. For a useful overview of the early achievements of London Unity, see Malcolm Page, 'The Early Years at Unity' in *Theatre Quarterly* Vol. I No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1971, pp. 60-66.

2. Robert Mitchell, Edinburgh Evening Dispatch, 5 July 1946.

3. Robert Mitchell, Forward, 28 September 1946.

4. See my 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Search for a "Scottish People's Theatre" in *New Edinburgh Review* No. 40, February 1978, pp.27-31, where I suggest how the notion of 'the people' substituted for a concept of class and ultimately became indistinguishable from that of 'nation'.

5. For further details, see David Hutchinson, The Modern Scottish Theatre,

Glasgow, 1977.

6. The particular effort of Glasgow Unity is in clear accord with that broader historical trend of realism identified by Raymond Williams in 'A Lecture on Realism', Screen Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring 1977, pp. 61-74. Williams defines the central characteristics of the realist movement in terms of social extension (the inclusion of persons of 'lesser' rank), contemporaneity and secularism, all of which are central in Unity's own challenge to Scots drama. Moreover, Williams' notion of The Big Flame representing social extension plus 'hypothesis' is clearly applicable to the work of James Barke.

7. For a fuller account of Glasgow Unity's history, see my 'Towards a Scottish People's Theatre: The Rise and Fall of Glasgow Unity', *Theatre Quarterly* Vol.

VII, No. 27, Autumn 1977, pp. 61-70.

8. See Roland Barthes, 'L'effet du réel', Communications II, 1968, pp. 84-9.

This notion of the 'reality' I should clearly be read along in this volume, on stereotype reality could in some way be the screen.

9. See Williams, op. cit., p.

The Gorbals Story
Produced for New World Pi

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II, 1968, pp. 84-9.

This notion of the 'reality' produced by a film being in fact a 'textual effect' should clearly be read alongside Colin McArthur's comments, found elsewhere in this volume, on stereotypes, where he argues against the notion that exterior reality could in some way be unproblematically and unmediatedly transferred to the screen.

9. See Williams, op. cit., p.66.

The Gorbals Story

Produced for New World Pictures Ltd. Distributed by Eros. 74 mins.

Producer Emest Gartside
Director David MacKane
Photography Stanley Clinton
Assistant Director Kenneth K. Rick
Art Director George Haslam
Editor Helen Wiggins
Music John Bath

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SCOTCH REELS

Scotland in Cinema and Television

EDITED BY COLIN MCARTHUR



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