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Theatre Without Walls: The National Theatre of Scotland

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Abstract: The National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), which began producing work early in 2006, is a building-less theatre company which produces work in collaboration with a range of national and international partners. This article explores the ways in which mobility has been central to the conception and operation of the NTS throughout its first decade. In addition to an extensive commitment to touring, the company has made a feature of producing work in collaboration with local artists and communities across Scotland from Shetland in the far north to Dumfries in the south. The article focuses on the company's inaugural *Home* project and on *Ignition*, a more recent large scale collaborative project devised and performed on Shetland under the direction of Wils Wilson. My aim is to show not only that the NTS offers an imaginative and flexible model that productively challenges the orthodoxy of existing national theatres, but that in so doing, it evidences a culturally distinctive and heterogeneous Scotland that privileges inclusivity and participation in arts practice and is de-centred and democratic in impulse.

Keywords: Scotland, national, theatre, Wils Wilson, mobility, localism

On the 26 February 2006 I boarded a small hopper bus in the centre of Aberdeen and, along with a number of other people, travelled through the darkness to the Middlefield council estate on the outskirts of the city. Here we encountered six unoccupied flats “each with a nameplate on the door featuring the word ‘Home’” and behind these doors around twenty performers (McMillan, “Home” 17). This was *Home Aberdeen* part of the National Theatre of Scotland's (NTS) inaugural performance project. Outside the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh just over six weeks later on 11 April, I boarded a bus again, this time bound for Edinburgh International Airport and a site-specific performance titled *Roam*, a co-production between the NTS and the Edinburgh based site-specific company Gridiron. Several years later, on 24 March 2013, I found myself travelling in car towards the town of Lerwick and a welcome cup of tea at the end of the NTS's large scale

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community project *Ignition*. Finally, on 30 May 2016 I was part of an audience bussed to a large barn in the Perthshire countryside for *306: Dawn*, an emotive tribute to soldiers executed for cowardice during WW1. These are perhaps rather obvious examples of the ways mobility has been foregrounded in the work of the NTS but they demonstrate how far the company's work problematizes, to borrow Tim Cresswell's phrase, the idea of "fixity as an ideal" (28).

Unlike most national theatres, the NTS habitually operates with a degree of mobility and flexibility. Since it began producing in early 2006, it has become a significant player in the wider field of twenty-first century British theatre and its impact and influence can be felt, I want to suggest, in two related areas. Firstly, and perhaps most significantly, its status as a virtual and building-less company, creating work in diverse settings, on a variety of scales, and in collaboration with a wide range of partners, challenges the *wholeness* of existing models for national theatres, including the National Theatre of Great Britain on London's South Bank. Secondly, although the NTS's first decade has been marked by international success with productions such as Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006) and David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011) attracting large audiences and critical plaudits outside Scotland, the company has been more remarkable in its sustained commitment to geographical reach and inclusivity within Scotland itself. In this regard, the NTS is characterized by an approach that privileges flexibility and mobility not only in taking work to remote communities, but also in making work in collaboration with communities via embedded projects.

"Precisely because," as Joanne Tompkins has noted, the company does "not occupy a fixed venue," the work of the NTS often foregrounds important questions of space and place and their important relationship to conceptions of identity and community. These questions, it goes without saying, have become increasingly urgent and vexed as the political landscape of contemporary Scotland, the UK, and Europe shift in potentially alarming directions (Tompkins 71). As a public and social art form, theatre has long been understood as a platform for the exploration of communal identities and shared values and this function is arguably nowhere more apparent than in the operation of National flagship companies which are typically, as is the case with the NTS, publicly funded. Moreover, if communities are a constant in theatre in the many and varied ways they are imagined and embodied on stage, they are also delimited by the material working practices of theatre companies. For this reason, the building-less structure of the NTS, its core objective to develop, produce and present "brilliant, innovative and ambitious theatre in *partnership* with the Scottish theatre community and other artistic and international collaborators" is central to its cultural efficacy and impact, as is its commitment to "enthuse, entertain, inform and engage a diverse and constantly developing sustainable community of audiences,

participants, artists and supporters” (NTS, Annual Report 2015 n. pag.). Terms like partnership, participants and collaboration, which are liberally peppered across NTS press releases and reports, immediately suggest democratic structures in which creative decision making is shared and in this regard the NTS, at least notionally, can be seen as a microcosm of post-Devolutionary Scotland: inclusive, outward looking and democratic. My aim in this essay is to test this rhetoric of inclusion against its practice on the ground.

National theatre companies founded in the twenty-first century are a relatively rare thing, as are building-less national theatres, and for this reason the genesis of the NTS is worth examining. The campaign for a Scottish national theatre has a long history but was undeniably reinvigorated by the devolution referendum in 1997 and the subsequent re-opening of the Scottish parliament in 1999. In this context the establishment of a new flagship company seemed part of the optimistic progression of the country post-devolution, and campaigners found themselves pushing at an open door. In 2000 the recently elected Scottish Government agreed in principal to the idea of funding a national theatre company but importantly did not specify what form the proposed company should take. In the following year, however, a working group set up by the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) reached firmer conclusions, recommending the new company be building-less and essentially nomadic. Crucially, this SAC working group was significantly influenced in its conclusions by a report published in 2000 by the Federation for Scottish Theatre (FST) under the chairmanship of Hamish Glen, at that time artistic director of Dundee Repertory Theatre. The FST is Scotland’s membership and development body for professional dance, opera and theatre, and through its auspices the sector is able to speak with a collective voice. In this instance, the FST outlined the model for a building-less company, which it felt was the most desirable option for a national theatre in Scotland. The idea of a building based national theatre, most probably in Glasgow or Edinburgh, did not appeal to FST members who instead opted for a more inclusive model. The key thing to note in all this, is that by adopting the FST recommendation the SAC, and subsequently the Scottish Government, guaranteed that the model for the NTS emerged from the Scottish theatre community itself. The NTS thus conceived would act as a “creative producer [...] working with and through the existing Scottish theatre community to achieve its objectives” and moreover would have the support of the theatre sector into which it was born (SAC n. pag.).

From its inception, then, the NTS operated in an unusually energized cultural landscape. With the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, after a hiatus of almost three hundred years, Scotland had entered a dynamic new phase in its history in which a growing sense of distinctiveness and autonomy in Scottish culture was increasingly tangible and in which the performance of stories about

and for Scotland, had peculiar currency. That said, stories about Scotland have long had unusual significance in Scottish culture. In his introduction to David Greig *Plays 1*, Dan Rebellato notes how for the Scots “national identity is often linked with the defense of cultural memory” (xiii). Anyone who has ever visited a Scottish bookshop will recognize this description. The bookshelves are packed with Scottish history books. For centuries, key figures and events in the nation’s past – William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots, the Treaty of Union, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Highland Clearances, the Scottish Enlightenment – have been circulated, distorted, sentimentalized and mythologized in a process of representational overload that until quite recently risked replacing meaningful focus on the present. In 1999 Tom Devine’s history of modern Scotland, *The Scottish Nation: 1700–2000*, briefly outsold the highest selling Scottish book of that year in Scotland: J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

The historian and cultural critic Tom Nairn gives a persuasive if rather pessimistic account of this cultural phenomenon in his influential study *The Break-up of Britain* (1977). Nairn holds that since the Treaty of Union in 1707 Scotland has lacked real political agency and consequently turned to over-inscribed historical narratives for a sense of cultural identity, becoming distorted and stunted in the process. Christopher Whyte’s explanation does not exactly contradict Nairn’s but gives a stronger sense of the importance of storytellers to the construction of Scottish cultural identity. In “the absence of an elected political authority,” he writes, “the task of representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers” (1998). Interestingly, this observation can be extended to Scottish folk culture. As Alan Lomax observed in 1951:

The Scots have the liveliest folk tradition of the British Isles, and paradoxically it is also the most bookish [...] Everywhere in Scotland I collected songs of written or literary origin from country singers; at the same time, I constantly encountered learned Scotsmen who knew traditional versions of the great folk songs. (6)

Lomax’s account is insightful. The reputations of writers and folklorists such as Robert Burns, Walter Scott and James Hogg have done much to consolidate the view that in Scotland traditional and literary cultures occupy common ground.

In any case, narratives of all kinds, and perhaps particularly historical narratives, are central to any nation’s understanding of itself. My sense of the significance of the NTS as a flagship company, relies partly on an understanding of it as engaged, sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly, in a project of nation building through the circulation of stories that help move twenty-first century Scotland forward. Through the company’s auspices, as David Greig has claimed:

Some writers have explored Scots language, others have explored the variety tradition, some have used the Scottish novel as a source, still others have responded to location and politics. Some writers have tried to avoid the question of national identity entirely. But whatever their individual response, all Scottish writers have found their work and its reception shaped by powerful currents of identity moving through Scottish society. (NTS, “Staging the Nation” n. pag.)

The NTS is first and foremost a child of the devolutionary moment and as such it plays a significant role in demonstrating that if contemporary Scotland sometimes remains delimited by, it equally lives within and moves forward and outward through, its stories and its story-telling traditions.

The NTS was formally constituted in 2004 under the artistic directorship of Vicky Featherstone, formerly of Paines Plough and now of the Royal Court. Happily, when it eventually began producing work in early 2004, the new company exceeded the expectations even of its most vociferous supporters. Writing in December 2009, with the benefit of hindsight, the Scottish theatre critic and cultural commentator Joyce McMillan identified the arrival of the the new national company as the key theatrical event of the decade:

Scotland's new National Theatre – which began operations in February 2006 ... has emerged as an iconic 21st century institution, born of the times we live in. With no theatre building base, and no permanent company of actors, the NTS functions as a light-touch commissioning and co-producing company, with a strong creative drive; and its flexible structure has opened the way to what is, by national theatre standards, a formidably experimental program. (“Review” 22)

The company's first season included Gridiron's *Roam* – mentioned briefly above – which was the first piece to be performed in a functioning International Airport, Anthony Neilson's *Realism* (2006) and Gregory Burke's by now legendary *Black Watch*. In terms of a statement of intent, however, the NTS's inaugural project was more deliberately inclusive and ambitious. In late 2005 Featherstone commissioned ten of the country's most prominent theatre practitioners to create entirely new performances for the launch of the NTS. Broadly inspired by the idea of 'home,' these performances were to take place simultaneously in non-traditional venues across the country and were to be devised and performed in collaboration with local companies, communities and artists.

On the evening of 25 February 2006, in the disused Caithness glass factory on the outskirts of Wick in the north east of Scotland, an old woman made a bid for freedom. Meanwhile, in an abandoned block of council flats in Aberdeen a fisherman lamented the devastation of the cod stocks that had once defined his existence. In the same block, behind a door labelled “Home is Where the Heart is ... in a room full of old photographs and nostalgic décor, an old lady was living

out a life of crushing loneliness, haunted by the ghosts of her long-gone family” (McMillan, “Home” 17). Elsewhere, a children and their families boarded a bus at the Brunton Theatre in Musselborough bound for a woodland adventure. On the same night, in six other locations – from Dumfries in the south, to Lerwick in the north, from Edinburgh in the east to Stornoway in the outer-Hebrides – Scotland’s theatre artists spoke to and about Scotland under the banner of a national company for the first time in the country’s history. *Home* was a free event which, with each performance running two or three times over the weekend, is estimated to have reached 10,000 people.

By anybody’s standards *Home* was a positive and imaginative response to pressure on the new company to assert both its authority as a national company and its flexibility and mobility as a ‘theatre without walls.’ The new company not only brought expertise and money to the table, it also fulfilled its remit of engaging creatively with local theatre companies, artists and communities in a diverse range of Scottish settings. Both *Home Caithness* and *Home Stornoway* involved local companies, Grey Coast Theatre Company and Theatre Hebrides respectively in the role of liaison, for instance, while Eden Court Theatre played a pivotal role as producer of *Home Inverness*. Alongside geographical coverage, there was also a focus on inclusivity across generations. Anthony Neilson’s *Home Edinburgh* for example, was based on notions of what First Minister’s questions at the Scottish Parliament might involve, and took the form of a verbatim piece devised in collaboration with a group of local schoolchildren and performed by adult actors. In *Home East Lothian*, Gill Robertson of the marvelous children’s company Catherine Wheels, took her audience on a journey that began outside the Brunton Theatre, as mentioned above, and ended at the Prestongrange Industrial Heritage site, a specially constructed ginger bread house and an imaginative retelling of *Hansel and Gretel*. Across the river Tay, *Home Dundee* drew on memories of the city’s dancehalls drawn from residents of a local care-home for the elderly. Elsewhere, director and designer Stewart Laing led a team of model makers in the creation of *Home Stornoway*, which took the form of a miniature theatrical installation in a shop on the town’s Church Street and Wils Wilson’s *Home Shetland*, was a guided audio-tour, complete with poetry and music, of the great Hjatland Ferry as it lay berthed in Lerwick Harbour.

If the setting for *Home Shetland* foregrounded issues of mobility by emphasizing the islanders’ relationship with and dependence on the sea, the geographical scope of the *Home* project overall, encouraged reflection on the distances between communities that comprise contemporary Scotland, while also demonstrating the NTS’s commitment to exploring Scottish identities in the communities in which those identities are made. By virtue of its geographic inclusiveness and pronounced regionalism *Home* emphasized and evidenced a confidently hetero-

geneous Scotland, while at the same time eschewing any notion that the nation could somehow be distilled in one production onto a single main stage in Glasgow or Edinburgh. The fact that it was logistically impossible to see all ten performances reinforced this anti-essentialist bias by reminding audiences that there is always some other version of Scotland being played out in some other setting. The new national company had chosen to manifest its imperative to reflect the whole range of Scottish life, social, geographic and cultural, by invading the material spaces of contemporary Scotland: the tenement; the factory; the shop front; the high-rise; the drill hall; the ferry; the forest.

Home represented a privileging of regionalism and an emphasis on inclusive practice which also established something of a pattern for the NTS. *Transform* (2007–10), for example, took the form of a series of collaborative schools projects that followed the pattern set by *Home* by being situated in specific locations and by identifying themselves as such. Projects included *Transform Moray*, *Transform Orkney*, *Transform East Ayrshire* and *Transform Fife*, for instance. On a larger temporal scale but with similar regional focus, over a period of seven months as part of the Common Wealth Games cultural programme, *The Tin Forest* (2014) explored Glasgow's relationship with its industrial past and its creative future in the process holding around 600 workshops which were attended by 10,000 people. More recently a major participatory arts project presented by the NTS and Aberdeen City Council titled *Granite*, was held across seven months from September 2015 to April 2016. Seeking to tell the story of the city across centuries, the project culminated in a performance in the grounds of Marischal College – the largest granite building in the world – and featured a cast of 100 community performers ranging from teenage school children to a former Member of Parliament. *Granite* also emphasised Scotland's long history of emigration, explored by Tom Devine in his major history of the diaspora, *To the Ends of the Earth* (2011). Among the stories told was that of a young nineteenth-century stonemason who with his young wife is lured by the promise of richness to participate in the granite construction of Odessa in the Russian Empire. As Joyce McMillan reminded us:

If projects like these remain a relatively low-profile strand of the National Theatre of Scotland's work, a show as memorable as *Granite* makes an irresistible case for its huge significance; bringing together community and professional theatremakers, present and future artists, the vital story of a city and all the resources of its national theatre, to produce something beautiful, unique, and full of transforming creative power. ("Theatre Review" 18)

A fitting metaphor for Aberdeen itself, granite was quarried for more than 300 years near Aberdeen and shipped all over the world. Many of the city's buildings are made of the grey stone.

I have been emphasizing the NTS's commitment to making work in situ, which is all the more noteworthy, I suggest, because the company inherited an established model for touring which had found very famous expression in John McGrath and 7:84 Scotland's *The Cheviot the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973). During its initial run *The Cheviot* had given over 100 performances to around 30,000 people and had covered a distance of more than 17,000 miles across the whole of the country, including the Highlands and Islands. In so doing, as Kate Dorney and Frances Gray note, McGrath's play had "decisively proved that a Scottish National Theatre would find an audience" (83). In terms of form *The Cheviot* also exemplified a kind of politicized Scottish populism, one that invariably incorporates traditional music and song, that became a signature of late twentieth century Scottish theatre and subsequently of the NTS, especially in its touring work. Keiran Hurley's *Rantin* (2013–14), David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011), Lee Hall's *Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour* (2015) and the mighty *Black Watch* all borrow from McGrath's formula, for instance, although they vary considerably in content and political intent. Touring is a very old theatrical practice, of course, and issues of mobility are quite obviously central to its aesthetic. In what remains of this essay, however, I want to turn my attention to the theme of mobility as it was explored in a couple of projects made by the director Wils Wilson in collaboration with one of Scotland's most outlying island communities: *Home Shetland* (2006) and *Ignition* (2012–13).

As one half of the Yorkshire based company Wilson + Wilson, Wils Wilson, had an established a reputation for 'creating innovative site-specific theatre, installation and art in unexpected locations' when she was commissioned by Featherstone to make *Home Shetland* as part of the NTS's inaugural project (Wilson+Wilson). Wilson chose a direct engagement with her community and its relationship with mobility by staging *Home Shetland* on board the Northlink Ferry while it lay berthed in Lerwick harbour between journeys. The choice of the ferry as setting was a straightforward acknowledgement by Wilson of the extent to which Shetlanders have historically been dependent on the sea. It impossible to be any more than three miles from the sea while on Shetland, a sub-arctic archipelago that includes 16 inhabited islands and has a total population of just over 23,000. The Lerwick to Aberdeen ferry is the main artery connecting the islands to the Scottish mainland, and the world beyond. As such, it is, as one critic observed, "the repository of the countless stories, dreams, hopes, and crises that take people away from Shetland or bring them home" (Haswell n. pag.).

For *Home Shetland*, audience members were furnished with personal headsets in the terminal, and served hot soup, before being ushered onto the ferry where they were guided around its public spaces, and private cabins, encountering snippets of performance along the way. The text was by the Scottish poet

Jackie Kay and a young local playwright, Jacqueline Clark. Original music was provided by the composer Hugh Nankivell, and the artist Karen Club designed the visuals. In addition, Wilson enlisted the help of forty locals who, alongside professional performers, became the ferry's passengers and crew. The effect was cumulative. For the *Observer's* Andrew Burnet, the brief encounters of *Home Shetland* merged into a "poignant patchwork of lives weathered by family quarrels, fleeting liaisons, old age [and] bereavement" (24). As audience members eventually reached the ferry's car deck 'sixty suspended boiler suits with fiddle music coming from their beating hearts' brought the piece to its emotional climax with a rendition of the traditional song, *The Leaving of Lerwick Harbour* (Haswell 2006). Much of *Home Shetland's* power derived from the variety of ways in which it engaged with mobility and stasis. The production played with the conflicting meanings of the ferry as representing both leaving and returning, for example, and conflated these meanings to construct a Shetland identity significantly defined by its many partings and reunions thus charting the relationship between performance and real life in terms of mobility. *Home Shetland* comprised diverse elements including an art installation with video projection, a musical score, live performance, recorded poetry but also, and importantly, the spatiality and mobility of the ferry itself. You could feel the ferry moving as you made your journey through its diverse spaces.

On a different temporal scale but with similar regional and thematic focus, *Ignition* (2012–13) was a six-month project produced by the NTS in association with Shetland Arts and Creative Scotland which explored the islanders's relationship with the car. Again directed by Wils Wilson, *Ignition* culminated in three performance events in locations across the archipelago. Although firmly rooted in its locale, *Ignition* was something more than a site-specific project, or perhaps it is a site-specific performance on the move. Following Fiona Wilkie in her 2012 article "Site Specific Performance and the Mobility Turn," I want to read it as part of a "rich dialogue between site and mobility" that characterizes not only certain types of site-specific performance, but the mobility turn in contemporary culture more broadly (204). *Ignition* presented the motor vehicle, not in opposition to stable island culture but as the very essence of it. The final performances were experienced primarily from *inside* motor vehicles. While being driven between sites we picked up a hitch-hiker who sang a ukulele lament, encountered a travelling garden gnome and its gregarious owner and, from someone's parked car, heard poetic reminiscences from older islanders of fishing disasters and car accidents. From the back seat of the same car we watched teenagers perform a beautiful parkour routine while elderly ballroom dancers waltzed by. The narratives that were sutured together to create *Ignition* drew on stories collected by the performance artist Lowri Evans who for several months prior to the main event

hitch-hiked the archipelago dressed as the the White Wife, a figure from Shetland folklore who is said to appear when islanders are in need of help.

As Wilkie reminds us conventional accounts of site-specific art have tended to conceptualize it as “bound to one place in a fixed relationship antithetical to discourses of mobility” (204). *Ignition* is an example of a site specific performance that moves *through* space and focuses on how identities are constituted via relationships which are always in flux. The same might be said of the *Home* project as a whole, and indeed – perhaps at a bit of a stretch – of post-devolutionary Scotland itself where the speed of constitutional and political change has at times seemed breathtaking. For theatre artists living and working in Scotland, this energized environment has meant that the imperative to interrogate, reassess and re-imagine the idea of Scotland and its relationship to Britain and Europe has become very powerful. As David Pattie has observed:

... post devolution, Scottish culture operates in different territory. The threats and promises of the devolution debate – a debate, which Andrew Marr’s *The Battle for Scotland* makes clear, lasted for most of the twentieth century – are no longer enough; we need new maps to help us negotiate the terrain ahead. (143)

The flexible, building-less and co-producing model of the NTS facilitates the mapping of this territory because its dispersed practices are always and already de-centred. Indeed, at the end of its first decade, the NTS continues to be strikingly successful in producing engaged and experimental local theatre in an era in which suspicion of traditional elites and centralized power continues to be widespread.

From the outset the NTS’s virtual model proved extremely popular with theatre scholars and cultural commentators to whom it looked inclusive, modern and progressive. For Nadine Holdsworth, for example:

At the National Theatre of Scotland, national citizens, playwrights, artists, theatre-makers and creative producers collaborate to put on a rich programme of events that encapsulate the multiple communities that constitute the Scottish nation in a way that is outward looking, forward thinking and internationally significant. (37)

In addition, as Liz Tomlin has observed, the NTS had a distinct financial advantage over building based theatres because the “collaborative nature of the model ... ensured that a comparatively significant percentage of the £4 million annual grant could go directly into artistic cost, rather than overheads” (31). Finally, the appeal of the model was further evidenced by its adoption by the new National Theatre Wales, in 2009 and by the recent appointment of the NTS’s creative producer Neil Murray and associate director, Graham McClaren, to the the artistic directorship of Ireland’s national theatre, the Abbey in Dublin. The announce-

ment in 2015 of Murray and McClaren's appointment was accompanied by the following press release:

We believe in the concept of a national theatre that reaches all of the country. This applies to touring work, but also addresses the issue of where shows and projects are rooted and made, regardless of geographical remoteness or perceived social barriers. (ctd. in Crawley n. pag.)

If the success of the NTS tells us anything, it is that to create a theatre company that is truly national touring is not enough, nor is streaming main stage productions into cinemas across the country which has been a major recent innovation of the National Theatre of Great Britain. The NTS grew out of a pre-existing theatrical culture that was bold, vibrant and innovative and in some senses it could only ever be as good as the theatre culture that gave birth to it. One might go so far as to describe the NTS as a Scottish solution to a Scottish cultural problem. In this sense its configuration and output should continue to tell us things not only “about [how] performance can help us understand the workings of national identities but also the inverse: how thinking about national identities can help us understand the workings of performance” (Harvie 4–5).

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Bionote

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