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ou were recently in Glasgow, Scotland, for its third annual Mayfest. Could you tell us about it?

Catherine McLeod: Mayfest has been designed by the Scottish Arts Council and the Scottish Trade Union Congress. It's an attempt to involve trade unions directly in arts production. Several years ago a fellow named Alex Clark got the idea that the international "peoples" festival May day could be celebrated in more creative ways than a simple march and demonstration. That it could include the production and performance of plays. Unlike most theatre festivals, then, this one started with a direct audience — people in Glasgow who celebrated May day. With Ferilith Lean, the Festival organizer, they pulled together a group of sympathetic artists, performers, theatre workers and musicians to make a festival that, although it included international work, primarily celebrated local culture, past and present. If you've ever been to Glasgow you'll know that they have their own language — they call it Glaswegian. You could go into a large theatre, like the Citizen in the Gorbals, and hear people on stage speak Glaswegian. For a visitor from Toronto, the accents in the play "In Times of Strife" were so thick it was almost like hearing a beautiful and melodic new language. The audience of course really understood it. And I heard that the people who worked on the play really enjoyed discovering their own voices.

What was that play about?

It was based on a play by Joe Corey about the miners' strike of 1926. It was first produced in 1927. The 1985 production was mounted by the Scottish division of 7:84. The play describes the impact of a long strike on a mining community. It was especially powerful as the audience could relate it to the recent miners' strike.

Was the festival any different from a mainstream theatre festival? John McGrath has argued that working-class theatre must be in traditional venues — the clubs with their tradition of stand-up comedians and so forth. Was this festival held in theatres?

Mayfest's definition of a theatre is quite broad. There was street theatre, music, poetry, club acts, rock concerts, performances in clubs for the elderly. "Benny Lynch", one of my favourite works, was performed in a rather make-shift theatre to groups of senior citizens who thoroughly enjoyed it. They beat their canes on the floor to show approval and argued with the performers over interpretations of the Benny Lynch story, which they all knew by heart.

There was a big May day march that ended up at Calvin Hall and a number of performers got up and sang songs and did comedy and routine. If you're talking about workers' culture as oral culture, there wasn't much of that. This was an attempt to meld traditional forms of theatre (using people's own language) with popular culture. There was a group called the Mint Jewelips who are five women from London, and they do Rap (talking) and a *capella* versions of popular songs and comedy routines. It's very much like street theatre, but it was in a place called the Third Eye (or I or aye), which is an artists' resource centre, bookstore, theatre, café and bar. It's a centre for progressive artists in the town.

Did the festival succeed? In other words, did it manage to attract a group of people who otherwise might not go to the theatre?

It really did. I noticed it most at a production of *Wildcat*, which is a breakaway from 7:84 of Scotland. They decided that they wanted to do full-scale musicals. They used humour, theatrics, drama and every kind of device they could think of to get people's attention. They used a full band. Their production was called "Business in the Backyard" and it was about Nicaragua and El Salvador. And it was one of the most stunning pieces of theatre that I've ever seen. It was in one of the very large theatres and they were filled every night. And they weren't the usual theatre audience or even the peace movement. It was a very disparate audience. They packed the place because they did understand the notions of entertainment, excitement and drama. It had a political message about Central America, but people were willing to pay to hear it because it was also a good night out. The evening that I saw the performance the ambassador from Nicaragua was brought up on stage and presented with a cheque for £10,000 which was raised by a trade union. It was a brilliant use of theatre for bringing an issue right home.

It was much less like any political theatre that I've seen in Canada than it was like what I saw in Brazil. It was around carnival time and they pull in musicians from the street, and it's large-scale with colour and dance. It puts across a political message and it's entertaining at the same time. The *Wildcat* people seem to be onto something.

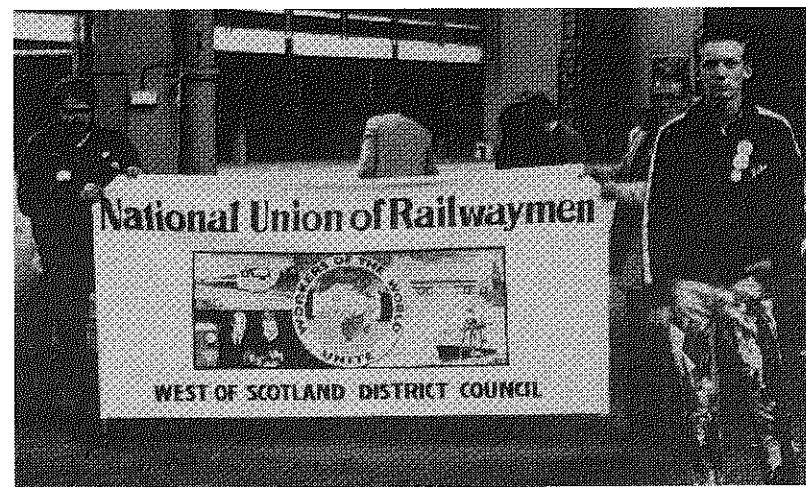
How important was the fact that this festival was in Scotland, with its local traditions and a sense of being different from England? How important was this for the festival?

It seemed most important within the arts community itself. Because the people who produce art and theatre are unemployed. There is a massive depression, massive unemployment in Scotland right now. Scotland acts as a colony for the English. Because they're so swamped by the English product they're starting to understand their differences from the English theatrical traditions and to pinpoint their own audiences and issues. It seems that the cultural community is taking the lead. It's a very progressive arts community.



ANOTHER GOOD NIGHT OUT

Trade Unions And Theatre



An Interview With Catherine McLeod Conducted by Alan O'Connor

Photographs by Catherine McLeod

7:84 are probably best known for their play "The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil", about the effect of North Sea oil exploration on a local community. How important have they been in developing this kind of political theatre in Scotland?

7:84 is very respected in Scotland. The Wildcat breakaway wasn't an ideological break. The issue was musical theatre versus non-musical theatre. Wildcat wanted to do musicals. 7:84 had its own agenda. It wasn't a destructive break. It's what happens in a period of growth. A good idea spawns another good idea.

The trade union movement played an important role. I was escorted through Glasgow by Alex Clark, who is just the most incredible guy. At the age of 14 he went to work in the mines. He was a miner for most of his life until he got involved in Actors Equity. Three years ago he was appointed the first full-time Arts Officer for the Scottish Trade Union Congress. He's always understood that cultural work is essential. He's very aware of a sense of community and cultural traditions among workers. But he's fired by the idea that workers have been excluded by elitist culture and that the unions have to reclaim access to cultural products and cultural production. In the working class there are artists, poets, philosophers, storytellers, dancers and musicians. There have to be venues for the expression of those voices and skills. The alliance between organized cultural workers and the trade union movement is for him an essential alliance and a very powerful one. Particularly at a time of economic depression, which people may experience psychologically as a personal dead-end.

I learned so much from Alex Clark that what I want to do is begin building a Mayworks festival in Toronto for next year's May day.

What has been the role of the trade union movement in England and Scotland?

It's extremely unusual. The festival was initiated by the Arts and Entertainment Subcommittee of the Scottish Trade Union Congress. We don't have that kind of a subcommittee of the Canadian Labour Congress, but we do have the new Labour and Arts Committee of the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto. Equity and the Musicians Union were especially important. The impetus came from members of the Scottish TUC who are involved in the arts themselves. The most active group were the British Actors Equity. They felt strongly that all levels of government should put more money into culture and the arts in an era of increased leisure time — that means unemployment!

Who put up the seed money for the festival? Did the unions make a contribution?

The money was put up by the District Council, the Scottish Arts Council, regional arts councils and the Scottish TUC. This year they've also got funding from business. But it started off as an Arts Council and labour funded activity. The budget is £90,000 for administration and the activities fund themselves.

Were people worried about the effect of business funding?

I didn't hear about that. In fact the only controversy seemed to be an attempt to encourage community involvement beyond central Glasgow. There was an attempt to pull the housing schemes around the city into the festival, but the community groups argued that they didn't get an adequate share of the pie. People on the outskirts of the city find it difficult to get into the centre to see performances. It think that this problem of underfunding will be put right next year. The festival is only three years in operation and people are still learning. There were things going on throughout the city but the things in the centre got the highest funding.

Was women's theatre and feminist theatre very strong at the festival?

One of the most beautiful pieces I saw was a production of "A Raisin in the Sun". It was done by the Black Theatre Co-Op and the main roles in that were for women. Then I went to "Under-Exposure" and "The Mrs Docherties". They were both on the same night and *all* of the roles were by women. The production of the Mint Jewelpies was one of all women. Looking through the programme, there were a lot of roles for women and women's issues were really upfront. It was a shock to me because if you go to the theatre in Toronto you're lucky to see a woman or two. Even in "In Times of Strife", which was written in 1927, it was the women who had the dominant roles. I don't think it's an accident that Ferilith Lean, who organized the festival, is a feminist and a socialist. It certainly showed in the kind of programme that came together.

Was there any gay and lesbian theatre?

I didn't see everything, but I didn't see any gay or lesbian theatre.

What about minorities. Was there much ethnic theatre?

The Black Theatre Co-Op was there. The Theatre Centre, from London, is a black theatre group.

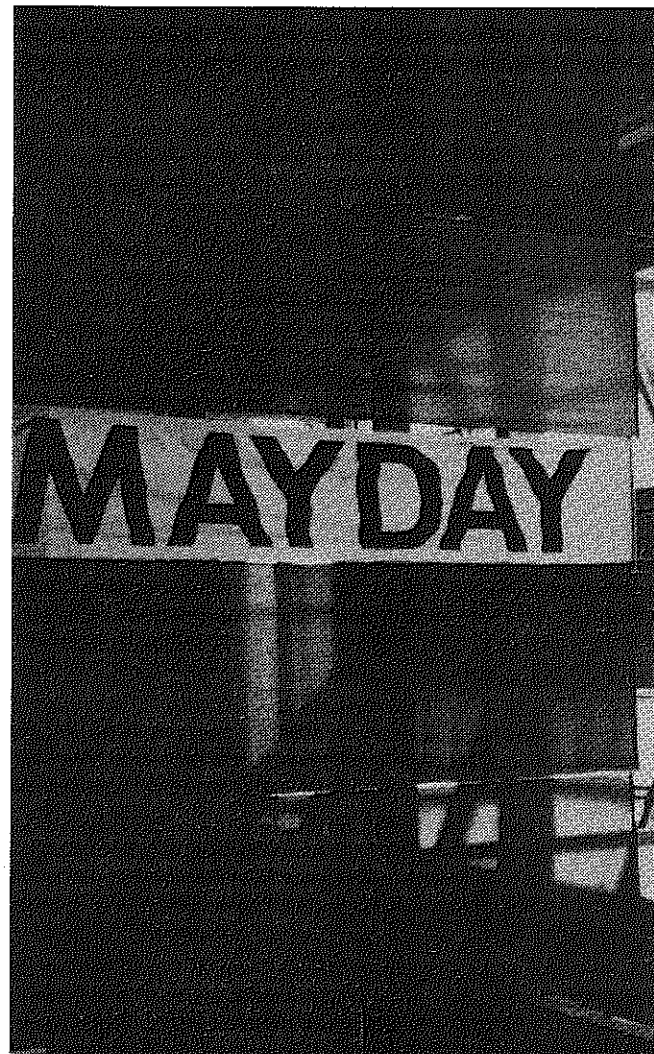
I should tell you about "The Mrs Docherties" because you're Irish.

SCOTLAND

acts as a colony for the English. Because they're so swamped by the English product they're starting to understand their differences from the English theatrical traditions and to pinpoint their own audiences and issues.

Mrs Docherty decides to have a family reunion and she sends a letter out to all the other Docherties to come back to Ireland for a reunion. The play is set in the waiting room at the airport where she goes to meet them. And the first Mrs Docherty arrives and she comes from the Caribbean and she's black. The second is from Africa and she's black. The third arrives from London and she's black. This is a surprise for Mrs Docherty. The cultures of the black women are completely different and they start arguing with each other. So the issue of this kind of difference is addressed. Anyway, they end up realizing that they are all Docherties and they figure out their past. In the days when ships went to pillage the rest of the world, some sailors like the good-hearted Docherties didn't like exploiting the colonies so they jumped ship and made their homes all over the world. It was a fabulous play about people who preferred to stay instead of being part of the exploitation of these places. That play was done for schools, incidentally.

The same evening there was a play by the same company. It dealt with a British photographer, a sports reporter for an English paper. She is sent to South Africa to cover a soccer game. While she's there she befriends a young Capetown girl who is a soccer fan. The play dealt with our complicity with the South African situation and the realization by the reporter that soccer is a way of legitimating and validating the regime. It was very poignant and beautiful. They used a lot of innovative techniques — backlit projection, audio sound — to compensate for the low budget and the fact that they can't afford costumes and props. They use technology on the stage and I thought it was a very economical production, dramatically powerful and highly portable.



You obviously see great possibilities in this kind of theatre and this kind of festival.

Because it makes theatre available to people other than the traditional theatre audience (three out of every 25 Canadians). You know, the people who can afford the ticket and the clothes to go to the traditional theatre. The majority of the people are being cut off from what I think is a very important tool for understanding who they are and where they fit in the world. I would really like to see more theatre workers put their minds to developing cost-effective, powerful, portable, human-scale theatre. A theatre that people can get their hands on and use.

Catherine McLeod is a writer, poet and mass media specialist. She has been a contributor to *This Magazine*, *Flare Magazine* and *Our Times*, and is currently a book reviewer for the *Toronto Star*.

Her published non-fiction includes *Women at Work in Ontario 1850 to 1930*, published by the Women's Press. She is also a contributing author to *The Great War: The Social Impact of the First World War on Canadian Society*, published by New Hogtown Press.

Catherine has just completed a multimedia drama — "Glow Boys" — about life in the nuclear family in a nuclear town. She is co-chairperson of the Arts and Media Committee of the Metro Toronto Labour Council and a member of the Artists' Union.