Chapter Nine

Rethinking dramaturgy

The previous chapter concluded by drawing attention to the ways in which the ‘vitality of contemporary Scottish theatre can be seen to be a key expression, and now arguably a determinant, of national cultural and political identity – or, to be more precise, identities’. In 1997, David Greig and David Harrower wrote:

Scotland has voted to redefine itself as a nation. To redefine ourselves we need to understand ourselves, exchange ideas and aspirations, confront enduring myths, expose injustices and explore our past. The quality, accessibility and immediacy of Scottish theatre make it one of the best arenas in which these dialogues can take place.¹

This concluding chapter reviews radical changes in Scottish dramaturgy as part of the process of rethinking Scottish culture in the period approaching and following the 1997 devolution referendum and the 1999 opening of the Scottish Parliament. The discussion addresses not only, towards the end, the nature of the National Theatre of Scotland, but the changes in dramatic methodology and linguistic function found in the work of younger playwrights. It reviews the ways in which the body of work produced by these playwrights in the decade before and the decade after 2000 can be seen to reflect concerns in – and, perhaps, influence – major changes under way in Scottish political and social attitudes and cultures of that period. The chapter also considers playwriting by Scots whose family background can be seen to be in cultures sometimes called ‘new Scottish’. Before addressing each of these topics in turn, it is helpful to consider a burgeoning area of Scottish drama where internationalism is, ipso facto, central. That is play translation as it has developed since the earlier work of a playwright like Kemp and goes wider than the work already discussed by Lochhead, Morgan and Clifford. The role of translations as an impetus for the internationalising of Scottish drama and theatre should not be underestimated. In fact, an underlying theme of all these examples is the way in which they support the move that Peter Zenzinger, quoted in chapter 1, has observed ‘beyond the self-
conscious Scottishness of the earlier dramatic tradition. All have both national and international concerns.

Bill Findlay, writing in 2004, commented on the general issue of translation of foreign-language drama into Scots since the end of the World War Two:

[The] past seventy years has, in terms, of quantity and the variety of languages and literary genres translated, been the richest in Scotland’s literary and theatre histories for translations into Scots. Moreover, that body of translation rivals the quantity of original work written in Scots over the same period, emphasising the important contribution that translation has made to modern Scottish literature and drama.

The translations of Kemp in the 1940s and 1950s have already been touched on as examples of a developing use of versions of contemporary, but archaised, Scots for serious dramatic purpose. By that period, Douglas Young had already produced translations from Greek, Latin, Gaelic, Irish, Italian, French, German, Russian, Welsh, Lithuanian, and Chinese in his poetry volumes \textit{Auntran Blads} (1943) and \textit{A Braird o Thristles} (1947). In the 1950s, he moved from the lyric to the dramatic with versions of Aristophanes’ comedies, \textit{The Puddocks} (1958) and \textit{The Burdies} (1959). Although the use of Scots was still being represented here on stage in comic contexts, the sources for translation marked an ambition to assert the power and status of drama in Scots. Not only could Scots accommodate the drama of Molière, it could take on the challenge of translating classical drama. As John Corbett says:

It is significant that the two great periods of translation into Scots – the sixteenth and twentieth centuries – have been times when the process of national refashioning was at its most urgent.

For Young, the process of national refashioning was an explicit aspect of his political views. Other playwrights, however, who worked then on translation into Scots, like Victor Carin with, for example, his \textit{Servant o Twa Maisters} (1965) from Goldoni and \textit{The Chippit Chantie} (1968) from von Kleist’s \textit{Der Zerbrochene Krug}, appears to have been, like Kemp, focused more on the dramatic potential of Scots as a lively target language than a larger ideological project.

Yet, Corbett’s observation holds generally. However one frames it, the process of translating into Scots carries with it an implicit assertion of the value of Scots as a dramatic language. Indeed, my own