

## Local Hero: The Places of David Greig

Thank you, Jackie in particular, for the invitation to speak today on David Greig's work.

In this paper I want to think again about David's work in relation to place. It has become almost standard to connect his work with concepts around

internationalism, non-place, and globalization. His work demonstrates a sharp awareness of the complex slippages of identity produced by the

interconnectedness of our world: from *Airport*, through *Cosmonaut*, through *San Diego*, to *The American Pilot* and beyond, the plays demonstrate an interest in

the indeterminacies of identity, the blurring of places and the sense of

connectedness that overwhelms any sense of the local. These motifs have

marked the way Greig has been written about by Clare Wallace, Marilena

Zaroulia, Adrienne Scullion, Nadine Holdsworth and, indeed, me.

While I don't want to back-pedal from this position, I am encouraged to think

again by some of David's recent work and indeed his non-theatrical - or possibly

non-theatrical - activities. In a much-quoted phrase from an article in the early

1990s, Greig once stated that 'any playwright who tells you they're a nationalist is

either a bad playwright or a bad nationalist'. It may have come as something of

surprise that David Greig has emerged as one of the most tireless and

persuasive advocates for Scottish independence, without having become, by any

stretch of the imagination, a bad playwright.

Indeed, I want to argue that, far from being a change of direction in his work, his

enthusiasm for Scottish independence is of a kind that emerges very clearly from

the ambivalences and ironies of his work, indeed is a model for a particularly

sophisticated and radical vision of what democratic national self-realization might

mean founded in a perhaps paradoxical nationalism without nation.

Local Hero

My title comes from Bill Forsyth's 1983 movie *Local Hero* a centrepiece of the

Scottish cultural renaissance of the 1980s that followed from the failure to

achieve devolution for Scotland in the 1979 Referendum. The film is widely

regarded as the first Scottish-set, Scottish-made movie (in terms of crew and

location) to be a truly international hit. Although the film predates Greig's writing

career by almost a decade, paying a little attention to the movie will be a way of

paying attention to David Greig.

'And perspex,' chips in Danny, 'you wouldn't get any perspex.'

'No detergents?' adds the other.

'And nylon,' says one.

'No ink?' continues Mac.

'And polish,' adds Danny

without oil? No automobiles? No heat?

Mac firmly rejoins: 'it's the \_only\_ business,' adding: 'Could you imagine a world

regret, Danny observes 'it's some business,'

accommodate a series of vast storage tanks. Registering only a brief flicker of

buy and convert into a gigantic oil refinery. The beach itself will be dug out to

walking along the beach on the Scottish west coast that the company plans to

representative of an American oil company, and Danny, his local guide, are

There's a well-known scene about half an hour into the film. Mac, the

['No polythene,' remembers Mac.]

By this point, both men seem pointedly to be running out of ideas:

'Dry cleaning fluid,' suggests Danny.

'Waterproof coats,' concludes the American bathetically.

The story of the film follows the negotiations to buy Ferness village and beach which eventually run into the sand in part because Mac has fallen in love with the village and the villagers and <sup>also</sup> then because it transpires that the beach is owned by Ben Knox, a beachcomber, played by Fulton Mackay, who is quite uninterested in selling.

In that precis, the film may seem sentimental, even trite, but in fact a number of ironies run through the film, complicating any straightforward assertion of Tartan localism. First, it becomes very clear that the locals, far from being distraught at the possibility of their <sup>home</sup> village being sold, are in fact thrilled, tired of the mundanity of village life, and relishing the thought of each of them becoming millionaires. And, seeing that they are onto a good thing, they decide to jack up the asking

price by feigning indifference to selling and holding a ceilidh, not as an expression of traditional local identity, but a performance of Scottish authenticity designed to ~~raise the asking price.~~ *get a better deal!*

Far from being a simple celebration of place conceived in terms of fixity and heritage, Ferness is presented as a throughway, a passing place, in which American and Soviet captains meet. The iconic image of the film is a red telephone box, both an image of local quaintness and global communications, both captured in the scene where Mac phones Texas, furiously pumping *10* pence pieces into the machine.

*-ly*  
In addition, the things that final attract Ferness to Mac are not those features which one might call purely local. They are the sea and the sky, his key turning point being a moment where the sky is filled with shooting stars. The sea and the sky seem emblematic of those things that link us all rather than expressing the particularity of one country, even if Scotland's latitude grants its inhabitants perspectives of privileged beauty.

The film also demonstrates a kind of meta-cognition of its own project. The film is packaging Scotland for - let's be honest - an American market just as the the

villagers present an authentic Ferness to Mac. In the movie Mac is short for MacIntyre and it's this name which leads to him being sent to Scotland; his boss thinks he's Scottish, though, as he later admits, it was the name his Hungarian parents adopted off the boat in the mistaken belief that it's a typical American name. In these ways, the movie keeps asking how it is possible to recognise the authentic and Scotland shivers into undecidably authentic and inauthentic fragments.

As an aside, I might add that in the movie Peter Capaldi, as Danny, with his awkward, gauche spaniel-like sprightliness, might be seen to be giving us a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of John Gordon Sinclair's performance in Gregory's Girl, Bill Forsyth's previous movie, something which seems acknowledged when John Gordon Sinclair pops up for a tiny cameo in the film. As Ian Goode has pointed out, 13 years later, in the Anglo-American co-production Loch Ness (1996), James Frain plays a Scottish research assistant meeting an visiting American VIP, in almost exactly the same circumstances and, weirdly, using almost exactly the same accent. In other words, James Frain in Loch Ness is doing an impression of Peter Capaldi in Local Hero, doing an impression of John Gordon Sinclair in Gregory's Girl. It suggests a layered pattern of self-conscious and self-reflexive jokes about the way that Scotland is represented on screen to

the world which defers the notion of an authentic Scotland in favour of Scotland as self-deprecatingly inauthentic for the ages.

*Jim S. 2003*

Paradoxically, it's this awareness of national identity as a source of scepticism and laughter that becomes a model for Scotland's emerging national identity.

*Quotations Q's*

The questions that Mac and Danny ask on that beach, in the gloaming, beneath a slate grey and salmon pink sky, are intended to be rhetorical by the characters - 'could you imagine a world without oil?' - but we are perhaps encouraged to take them as serious questions. (Indeed, the sequence has often been taken up by environmentalists who very much want us to imagine a world without oil.) But let's just note the pattern here: of rhetorical questions designed to close down options that the creative ironies of the movie insist on keeping open.

Exactly the same pattern was repeated thirty years later in the early months of the Scottish Independence debate. One of the first strategies of the 'No' campaign was to release a now notorious document listing '500 Questions' that the yes campaign had to answer. These questions ranged from the immensely important - No. 7 'Would scots be given a say in a referendum on the new negotiated terms of membership of [the] European Union' - to the weirdly specific

- No. 350 'How much would a first class stamp cost in a separate Scotland?' In other words, this was a series of rhetorical questions designed to close down the debate, both in the pedantry of the detail and the overall gesture, designed to imply that independence would be an awful lot of hard work. It was typical of the No campaign's acknowledged strategy, known as Project Fear, to stop people even contemplating the possibility of debate.

any

and therefore not to be considered

implying independence

PANDAS

This backfired, at least initially, with bloggers, tweeters and online commentators instantly creating parodies of the list. But, more profound perhaps was the Local Hero strategy. In the words of one commentator, the questions

QUOTE  
↑

'ranged from the serious to the silly. "What will happen to pensions?" right down to "what will happen to stamps?" The intention was to drown voters in uncertainty but inadvertently it actually opened up whole new areas of possibility. After all, what \*should\* happen to stamps?'

This writer goes on to raise some searching questions about the future of our communications networks concluding that by refusing to let the questions remain tightly rhetorical, 'Five hundred questions became five hundred possibilities.' This commentator was, if you hadn't guessed already, David Greig.



There is, in other words, a clear cultural and political connection between that beach in Aberdeenshire and Greig's contributions to the independence debate.

NOT A MASTER TERM

*It would be a mistake to see 'anti-Anderson' as that necessarily being a political intervention in signalling a master term, through which all of his work should be seen.*

At a meeting in June 2013 to rally support for the Yes campaign among the creative community of Scotland, Greig proposed a campaign strategy he called 'Imagine Scotland' asking groups to come together not to argue on the basis of what Scotland is but to imagine what it could be. It was the response of a worker in imagination, a writer, a creative artist, but more than that it placed creativity and imagination at the heart of the political debate. While Alasdair Gray misfired with an intemperate essay entitled 'Settlers and Colonists' which caused huge offence by whipping up anti-English sentiment and drawing ugly distinctions between members of Scotland's artistic community, Greig's vision of independence is the opposite of a drawing of boundaries; it remains fundamentally open.

*NTS - on the style and position of which Greig had a long influence through his work -*  
GREIG AND PLACE

This is perhaps best exemplified in his cross-over creative-political live-digital piece, The Yes/No Plays. This is an ongoing play delivered in miniature bursts on

Twitter, mostly featuring two ungendered characters, a couple called Yes and No. They represent of course the emotional attitudes of the two sides of the debate. David Pattie is going to talk more about this project later, so I will restrict my comments to a few observations. While Yes is brimming with possibility and openness, No is continually fearful and shuts things down. An early exchange ran as follows:

Yes: Come on!

No: What?

*Kicks off slippers.*

Yes: Why don't we just put a record on and dance by the fire?

No: I'm fine. (my?)

(my!) In another exchange, Yes asks No 'Give us a kiss' and gets the answer 'Germs'.

This might make the plays seem schematic and ~~one-sided~~, though as the Yes/No

Plays have unfolded and developed it becomes clear that both sides represent aspects of Scottishness, dour Presbyterian versus naive Internationalist, stiffly traditional versus clumsily progressive and are both being affectionately mocked.

Nowhere was this clearer than in January this year, when, owing to a mix up over the tickets, they accidentally went to each other's Burns Night events: Yes found

in part the project has evolved into a delightful ongoing or line s. Form

Libertic

him or herself at a 'Masonic Hall' with 'Kilted men Ladies in gowns and tartan sashes' and a harpist (6:45 PM - 25 Jan 2014) while No is dragged into a Yurt where he or she is presented with vegetarian haggis and ends up dancing bare chested round a fire to a Bhangra version of 'Ae Fond Kiss' (9:01 PM - 25 Jan 2014), finally taking off his or her Chris Hoy thong and flinging it into the crowd (11:55 PM - 25 Jan 2014).

A *Local Hero*-like self-awareness of the absurdities of representing Scottishness to the world came in the same month when a Canadian radio station picked up the Yes/No Plays and decided to perform a selection of them - whereupon Yes and No in the Twitter plays sat down and listened to them, Yes, typically, enjoying them ('They've caught you very well!' Yes tells No [11:44 PM - 10 Jan 2014]) and No denouncing them. 'It's terrible!' says No. 'It's a great example of Scottish internationalism!' says Yes (12:02 AM - 11 Jan 2014).

The lack of assigned gender to Yes and No represents a kind of free-floating identity that underscores the imaginative openness of Greig's position in these debates. It reflects perhaps what he meant in an article written for the Bella Caledonia website in August last year when he argued that there is 'a powerful civic consensus in Scotland which carefully separates electoral polity from

national identity' giving as examples people who feel nationalistic but want to remain in the Union alongside English residents of Scotland who favour independence. He sums this up more sharply as a 'separation of identity from politics'; I think Greig means that to have personal and public dimensions: just as the history or position of a person cannot simply tell you who they are, nor can the history of geography of a country tell you what they might be.

I think we could see several of David's plays offering the same perspective.

There are stories of profound and unexpected personal transformation throughout - recent examples might include Yellow Moon, Midsummer, and The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart - but I also think this uncoupling of historical materialism from identity is built into some of the plays. *Mainstream*, his text written for Suspect Culture, is a two-hander about the employee of a record company and a personnel consultant, written for a cast of four: two men and two women. The story of this single encounter is fragmented into multiple versions of the same scenes, the order scrambled, the encounters performed by every combination of the two male and two female cast. As a result, a certain story emerges from the play but shaken free of <sup>any</sup> a particular instantiation, its two characters somehow beyond gender.

~~detached from~~  
at one remove from

This is a particularly playwriterly perception to have, plays having the curious cultural position of being stories that escape being closed into one particular final material instantiation, always leaving open the possibility of an otherwise. Greig's plays, exemplifying this, are in themselves models of an imaginative openness to the possibility of change, which lies at the heart of his vision of Scottish independence, but also, let's remember, is also his very definition of politics.

However, although I and several others in this room have stressed the international, the cosmopolitan, the global slippages and indeterminacies of identity in David's work, we should not lose site of the traces of localism in what he's written. The form this usually takes is what is would call localism under erasure. The clearest example of this would be his Suspect Culture text *Lament*. *Lament* is, well, a lament: the whole performance is structured around a pervasive sense of loss, but of what? The performance seems unsure; indeed, at times it is almost as if the performance is lamenting that it cannot even remember what it has lost. This is felt in the ~~flyblown~~ nature of the text, in which words are missing, scenarios are brutally truncated, pastiched, the gestures of representation heavily ironised as if to announce the impossibility of representing that which we have lost. A key loss is a direct connection to local tradition. In one sequence, the company represent a tradition, perhaps even tribal culture, but the

text enacts the failure of imagination to represent such a life. A storyteller has come to visit the tribe. 'Bring yoghurt and dried apricots for the storyteller,' says Paul unconvincingly. 'Call the children together,' adds Graham, 'clear a circle of bare earth, bring water in a ... goatskin ... light fires, do .... things' (Suspect Culture Book, p. 265).

*late the text starts to collapse, the language ~~breaks~~ Mykron with gaps, lacunae, spaces.*

There are similar moments marbled through the plays, placeholders for the local, the authentic, the primal connection one might, in some distant imagined time, have had with place. In *Timeless*, the group of university friends have mythologised a last meeting on the beach to the point where they even sing a kind of hymn about that particular place and time, yet the very act of memory seems to occlude the reality of the moment itself. Connections to the earth are parodied and deprecated in *Outlying Islands*, *Victoria* and countless other plays.

*Nestor Creek, Plaza Vie Park*

*But recently in Dalgety in which a small police station is surrounded by wooded regions enclosed in a bushy <sup>marginally</sup> ~~island~~ ~~that starts to become~~ ~~mythology~~ ~~ship~~*

DALGETY

But, as in the Yes/No Plays, he equally parodies the other side, the elevated perspective that sees place as a generality. There's a pattern in certainly the earlier plays of adopting an aerial perspective - whether that is looking down at a city in *Airport* or *San Diego*, or Sean Connery's arrival by helicopter in the

*July  
the  
happening  
of  
concrete*

*collaborative, returning to celebration of both, each a mythical point in too which the gods remain (theatrical) <sup>perhaps a place</sup> <sup>ambiguity</sup> <sup>is also</sup>*

opening of *Caledonia Dreaming* - and this is often presented both as exhilarating and fatally disengaged. A good example of this is *The Architect*, in the scene early in act two where the architect of the title is confronted by an angry resident of the housing estate that he designed. They have their debate over a scale model of the estate, thus looking down from a godlike perspective on the place that Sheena actually has to live in. Leo's insistence that 'architecturally, they're well designed' seems rather hollow in the face of their practical shortcomings.

However, as I've argued elsewhere, the play does not wholly endorse Sheena's ground-level perspective either. Indeed, the general and the particular are in tension. It's important, I think, when looking at Greig's work to remember that a recognition of the painful difficulty of representing the local and particular still suggests that we might have an aspiration to try and localism's opposite, pure internationalism, might not be a satisfactory alternative.

In Theatre & Globalization, I argued <sup>wonky</sup> ~~sharply~~ against localism as a response to globalization and David's work was uppermost in my mind as a model. However, my suggested alternative, cosmopolitanism, does not evade or deny the importance of the local. The cosmopolitan perspective is an ethical position that suggests, in Kant's words, 'a wrong done in one place in the world is felt all over

only of  
localism  
15 of 20

it'. Cosmopolitanism encloses us all in a single moral community; now, while that, to my mind, does mean that ethical and political values and responsibilities flow straight over national boundaries, let's also feel the full force of Kant's description of 'a wrong done <sup>in</sup> place in the world'. Without the particularity of lived experience, the ethical community is an empty set of principles. Cosmopolitanism requires both an awareness of the particular local conditions in which everyone lives that need to be articulated with the most fundamental principles that we may lay claim to as human beings. Although cultural relativism <sup>will</sup> has seemed - maybe during the postmodern moment - a radical and enabling force, there's no particular reason why cultural relativism could not simply entail nationalism of the worst kind, the kind in fact that David Greig has repeatedly criticised in his contributions to the Independence debate as 'racism, xenophobia, inward-looking-ness and militarism'.

The problem with this kind of nationalism is that it attached moral force to national boundaries. Place has moral significance, for sure; if an elderly man falls over in the street in front of me, I am morally obliged to help him in a way that someone currently discussing oil on a Scottish beach is not. Place exercises supererogatory demands and responsibilities on us. But this is true everywhere.



Paradoxically, particularity has universal value and that value is not to be deflected at checkpoints and borders.

What this leads to is what I think David Greig's writing suggests, both in theory and practice: a nationalism without nation. This would be a politics that registers the moral value of particularity in constant productive tension with its other, assuming no inevitable connection between particularity and possibility, or, rather, allowing that connection to be made only by the imagination, not by legislation.

### **The Events**

I want to end by talking a little about *The Events* which seems to me to exemplify this strand in Greig's work. I assume everyone here has seen it, but *The Events* is a response to the killings carried out by Anders Breivik in Oslo and Utoya in 2011. Crucially, while the two central characters are played by the same people each night, the rest of the cast is made up of a local choir and is different for every performance.

For me, one of the key effects of this is that the performance holds together a sense of generality and particularity. The generality comes from the fact that we

know this is a play; it's on tour; it's loosely going to be similar everywhere it goes, with the usual minor inflections that we are familiar with from live performance. It is internationalist in a way we are familiar with in David's work, the history on which it is based fictionalised and transposed, the original *Events* and the events of *The Events* fused and combined into a spatially indeterminate location.

The presence of the choir does something quite different though. First, they are a local choir. Watching it, as I was, at the Young Vic in London, I saw a young London choir, their body language and some of their accents, even in song, recognisably ~~nearby~~ <sup>connected back to the world nearby</sup>, somewhat in contrast to the trained otherness of the actors.

That, as I'm sure was intended, led one to imagine the horror of a Utoya-type massacre taking place here, wherever that here might be.

But even more crucially, the presence of the choir added a kind of ~~precarious~~ <sup>precarious</sup> additional liveness to the event. The choir are often scattered across an upstage seating unit and their untutored spontaneity, sometimes watching the actors, sometimes reacting, sometimes catching each other's eyes and maybe sharing a private joke, gave me throughout an anxious sense of risk: with this relatively unrehearsed choir on stage, something could go wrong at any moment. This intensified the liveness and liveness is a kind of temporal localness. It felt

temporally local and that gave the whole performance precarious immediacy

which I found immensely powerful. → This ~~cooled~~ produced for me an intense ~~and~~ sense of care and attention to the here and now.

It's the force of these two aspects - the repeatable and the unrepeatable, the general and particular, the ~~local~~ <sup>performance</sup> and the tour - that combine to produce the

performance's most powerful effects. This reaches a particular peak at the very end of the performance. Claire has decided to restart the choir, believing finally that people will come. She stands and welcomes us as if we might be the potential choir. At which point the onstage choir starts to sing a repeated refrain around the words 'We're in here / We're all in here'.

The phrase is beautifully and movingly ambivalent. The phrase overflows boundaries between performer and audience, between fiction and reality, between here and there. Where is 'here'? Is it the theatre? Is it the church hall? Is it Britain or is it Norway? And who is the 'we'? Is it the choir? Does it embrace the audience too? Or does it in fact overflow this theatre and serve as an evocation of a wider political and moral community, standing together against the brutal European ~~nationalism~~ <sup>border policy nationalism</sup> of fascists like Breivik? When I saw *The Events*, I looked round at this moment; some people were crying, and some were singing along.

David Greig's evocation of place seems to be richly complex, identifying the values of the local with the values of the universal, that has become a model for his very particular intervention in the Scottish independence debate, offering a profoundly creative vision of a imaginative cultural reinvention that suggests a way that you can <sup>to</sup> be a good playwright and a good nationalist.