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Devolutionary sites: NVA, Grid Iron and Scottish site-specificity in the 1990s

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The aim of this article is to analyse the ways in which the productions of Scottish site-specific companies NVA and Grid Iron responded to the main political processes in Scotland in the 1990s, such as devolution. NVA's initial engagement with post-industrial landscapes was motivated by political protest, but their later projects focused on technology and global connectivity through cross-media collaborations until the end of the decade, when they ventured to rural areas in their exploration of spirituality in the human-nature relationship. In all of their projects, site-specificity proved to be a convenient and highly innovative tool for creating a symbiosis between a site and the ethical concerns raised in it, whether economic, political, scientific or ecological. On the other hand, Grid Iron has been distinguished by its equal interest in new writing and site-specificity, thus contributing to the growing corpus of contemporary Scottish writing as well as engaging with identity politics.

Keywords: devolution, Scotland, site-specific theatre, Grid Iron, NVA

The decade of the 1990s saw the powerful and irreversible redefinition of Scotland. Between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's resignation in 1990 and the beginning of the new millennium, the country acquired an additional, more local layer of decision-making in the form of a devolved Parliament (opened in 1999), and the series of major

changes that led to the (re-)establishment of this institution also caused a seismic shift in Scottish identities. The key concepts of the age, such as community-building, locality, novelty, the re-evaluation of the past and the search for alternative solutions made a significant impact on all aspects of public life including the performing arts, a particularly dynamic field in the 1990s. Emerging playwrights David Greig and David Harrower would become a long-lasting influence on world drama with their work performed, translated and studied globally, but beyond the proscenium arch, a major legacy of the decade leading into the new millennium was site-specific performances becoming an organic constituent of the country's theatre ecology¹. Besides evident institutional factors such as the shortage of small touring circuits (Wilkie, 2002), the mushrooming of site-specific practices provided 'a conscious alternative to the dramatic dominance of London' (Hodge and Turner, 2012, p.102), and they found resonance with the above-mentioned devolutionary key concepts. The aim of this article is to analyse how site-specific productions responded to them, particularly to community-building and locality.

I will turn to the country's first theatre companies consistently dedicated to the field since the 1990s, namely NVA (founded in Glasgow in 1992) and Grid Iron (founded in Edinburgh in 1995). Even though these two companies' understanding of site, performance and politics have been radically different since their early days, they are brought together here to reveal different, sometimes opposing aspects of the evolution of site-specific theatre in the 1990s, and to give an insight into the conceptual diversity of the sites of Scottish devolution.

Connecting and reconnecting: post-industrial, digital and rural landscapes in the NVA productions of the 1990s

Widely regarded as Scotland's first performing company with an exclusively site-specific profile, NVA was founded in Glasgow in 1992 by Angus Farquhar (b.1961), and has remained a defining influence on the country's arts scene ever since. As their webpage explains, 'NVA is an acronym of *nacionale vita activa*, expressing the Ancient Greek ideal of a lively democracy, where actions and words shared among a community of equals, bring new thinking into the world' (NVA, n.d.). As seen from this manifesto encoded in their name, innovation, community-building and politics have been at the heart of NVA's mission, and, as this section argues, site-specificity served as a natural and highly effective way of engaging with these concepts.

Fiona Wilkie explains that site-specificity entered theatre practice in the United Kingdom from other art forms such as sculpture in the second half of the 1980s; NVA conforms to this idea of creative exchange between artists from different contexts since the company grew out of Farquhar's decade-long career as a member of the cult 1980s band Test Dept (2002, p.141). Founded in London in 1981, Test Dept produced experimental post-industrial music, often in collaboration, and with an explicitly anti-Thatcherite agenda. The search for unusual alternatives to traditional venues became their trademark. After their success with Brith Gof's seminal *Gododdin* (1988) and their relaunching of the pre-Christian Beltane Festival on Edinburgh's Calton Hill in the late 1980s, they were commissioned to produce a site-specific show for Glasgow's City of Culture project in 1990, which resulted in *The Second Coming*. The work was staged at St Rollox Locomotive Works, a functioning locomotive yard in Glasgow, which Test Dept turned into a Thatcherite industrial theme park. The locomotive yard in *The Second Coming* connotes movement, power and connectivity, symbolising the climax of industrial Europe,

its future equally threatened by an emerging inhuman world order and massive industry closures. Mark Sinker emphasises this when recalling that 'by the end the distant walls had melted into the world all round: as if soon-to-close Ravenscraig and soon-to-close Clydeside were simultaneously visible, along with the whole of the rest of a revived / recuperated Glasgow' (1991, p.16). As a consequence, the found space of the locomotive yard becomes a multi-layered signifier in *The Second Coming*, since it is a strongly Glaswegian yet globally manifest landscape responding simultaneously to history, class and contemporary politics.

When discussing his devising methodology, this complex treatment of site is described by Farquhar as 'finding locations, and then building up a more and more sophisticated response to locations in the sense of building the work itself around the history of what [was] found there, the people and the actual materials of each place' (2014). This sensitivity to the diachronic and human dynamics of the places in which he has staged works started with *The Second Coming*, which he credits as his transition from music 'to directing and doing more directly performance work' (Farquhar, 2014).

NVA can be seen as Test Dept's natural successor, even though it gradually developed different subject matter and lines of inquiry. The first NVA projects, *Sabotage* (1993) and *Soundworks* (1994), were less theatrical than Test Dept's final productions as they invited a wide range of national and international artists representing a variety of disciplines in order to create a joint large-scale event. *Soundworks* blurred the borders between sculpture and sounds in a musical experience centred on objects. Farquhar describes the conceptual framework of NVA's first phase as follows:

[I]n the 1990s, very much was about what they would call cross-media and cross-border collaboration, that sense of drawing narratives from bringing together, say, film-makers, musicians, architects, scenographers, directors. We were creating these hybrid works, and again, the two areas of innovation were the choice of location and particularly in that period, I was interested in technical innovation (Farquhar, 2014).

Collaboration, location and technology are the key words he identifies for the company's cross-media projects; Joanne Zerdy also highlights NVA's 'cross-disciplinary linkages between the performing and visual arts, humanities, and the physical and social sciences' (2014, p.103).

These initial inquiries culminated in two truly global performances, *Stormy Waters* (1995) and *Virtual World Orchestra* (1996), both broadcast live worldwide on the Internet. Farquhar highlights that the essence of these shows was 'pioneering connectivity' as a result of his 'belief in non-geographical community', and they also celebrated a new sense of democracy since it was not media moguls but a small arts organisation in control of creating and transmitting images (2014). In *Stormy Waters*, more than fifty international and local artists set out to respond to Glasgow's post-industrial landscapes, creating music and digital images to be projected on to shipyard buildings, recorded, and broadcast through Glasgow University's website. More than just the broadcasting of the event, the virtual audience's reception was also part of the project, as Farquhar puts it, 'seeing how people from their own perspective might see a particular building or historic powerhouse that built the city' (2014). As a result, *Stormy Waters* transported Glasgow's historic buildings into a newly emergent, virtual reality transcending physicality and geography, thus creating an ephemeral but democratic site that could be accessed by early cybernauts all over Europe

and beyond.

After temporarily transferring to the virtual sites of cyberspace, Farquhar felt uncomfortable with what he saw as simply 'beta-testing new technology for American corporations' and 'being run by technology', so in the final years of the 1990s a redefining shift occurred in NVA's trajectory (2014). The company, previously engaged with the physical and political landscapes of post-industrial Britain and the new horizons of early digital culture, now found itself leaving the strongly urban context for Scotland's natural environment in order to engage with its unexplored dramatic potential. This inquiry, however, was not without precedent, as Farquhar acknowledges that the success of the Beltane Festival on Calton Hill was crucial for the Scottish Arts Council when encouraging and commissioning NVA productions for rural settings, since 'nobody else had this history of spiritual relationship to landscape' (2014).

NVA's major performances of this kind at the turn of the millennium, *The Secret Sign* (1998) and *The Path* (2000), invited urban audiences to rural environments, where the strategically devised elements of performance, soundscapes and lights juxtaposed with the majestic timelessness of Scotland's geography, and urged people's reconnection with the land through a strong spiritual experience. In *The Secret Sign*, audience members wearing hard hats descended a gorge in Stirlingshire at night, whereas, *The Path* merged pilgrimage, wandering and Tibetan philosophy in creating a walk through Glen Lyon, Perthshire; both projects were accompanied by lights, sounds and projections. The prominent spiritual dimension also brought with it ecological issues, since staging work with light and sound installations at protected natural settings, together with the increased human presence at these unspoilt locations, could potentially have a long-lasting negative effect on the sites. Farquhar explains that the

phrase ‘how you make your work is as important as why’ summarises NVA’s chief ethical principle, and minimising the damage caused by footfall and generators became a ‘set of creative challenges’ to be resolved by innovative technology (2014). This ecological sensitivity is part of the novel relationship to nature that NVA explores in their environmental phase, inspired by a spirituality built on the pre-Christian notion of transcendence in flora, fauna and geology. Therefore, the encounters between audiences and natural locations in these productions promote a more organic place for humans in the biosphere, without recourse to particular neo-pagan or environmentalist clichés.

Even though *The Secret Sign* and *The Path* seem to exemplify an apparent detachment from their contemporary political context by transmitting a more universal message far from inhabited lands, they do reflect the changes Scotland was experiencing at the time of their staging. Farquhar’s description of the mechanics of rural performance mirrors pro-devolutionary political discourse, as the decentralisation of power through empowering the local is the essence of both:

I was focusing for one or two years on working with small, local communities, establishing really strong contacts, involving people through employment in the work, and for me the important thing was that you weren’t comparing yourself with the reality that was reflected through mainstream media around big cities. You felt you could do this work in really small places, and be the centre of your own world. The nice thing with the Internet is that you’re able to circumvent some of those power relationships. Even though you’re on a tiny island off the West coast of Scotland, you can really speak to a wide audience, the ideas can go out and transfer across the world (Farquhar, 2014).

As a result, NVA understood 'site' not as an isolated piece of land transformed for a production, but rather as an organic element in a broader framework. Connected to its immediate surroundings, and more importantly to the human dynamics of the area by numerous relationships, site becomes meaningful for the global community through the virtual presence of the project. This political agenda of empowering the local is not far from Test Dept's agitprop a decade earlier, as it is fuelled by the same determination to catalyse positive social changes.

Farquhar's projects have proved to have a long-lasting influence on the Scottish arts scene by promoting site-specificity over decades, first defining the concept to audiences and critics, and then redefining it on several occasions. Their initial engagement with post-industrial landscapes was motivated by political protest in order to represent working-class masculinity and the devastating effects of Thatcherite capitalism, whereas in the 1990s their projects began to focus increasingly on technology and global connectivity through cross-media collaborations. At the end of the decade, NVA started venturing into rural areas in their exploration of spirituality in the human-nature relationship and ecological issues. As seen from this brief timeline, ethical concerns, whether economic, political, scientific or ecological, have always been at the core of Farquhar's projects, and site-specific aesthetics have proven to be a convenient and highly innovative tool for expressing and problematising them at the *right* place, thus creating a symbiosis between the place of performance and the questions raised in it.

The intimacies of theatre: the emergence and early productions of Grid Iron

Farquhar recalls that from the last years of the 1990s onwards, he ceased to regard his NVA productions as site-specific theatre, since they gradually moved away from the

performing arts into a direction that he labels as public art, a hybrid multidisciplinary way of responding to sites with no dominant theatrical element (2014). At around this time, Grid Iron Theatre Company was founded in Edinburgh. As the company's director Ben Harrison notes, at the time Grid Iron emerged, site-specific theatre 'wasn't new, Brith Gof, Neil Butler, Deborah Warner, a lot of artists had been doing it before [them] but when [Grid Iron] did it, it caught the imagination of the media somehow in a big way' (2014). Harrison further lists two Scottish forerunners as influential for Grid Iron's early phase: Gerry Mulgrew's *Communicado* for their interest in European forms, joyous representations and 'more exotic, innovative style,' and NVA:

[NVA] were an influence but they also were not competition because of their interest in landscape, as we were more interested in urban topography and structures, whereas Angus [Farquhar] always tends to be more interested in landscapes and environment and less in text and character. We see it as a dance between the site on one hand and the text on the other. But it was encouraging that he was able to deliver those projects and there was clearly an audience who wanted to go into the countryside and prepared to be rather adventurous (Harrison, 2014).

A major difference between the two companies that Harrison highlights here is the quality of *literariness*, including elements such as text and character. While these form an indispensable part of Grid Iron's productions, they have never been more than optional in Farquhar's projects. As a consequence, Grid Iron has been distinguished by its equal interest in new writing and site-specific aesthetics, thus contributing to the growing corpus of contemporary Scottish writing as well as pioneering the methodology of staging work at found spaces.

This site-specific focus, according to Trish Reid, 'has allowed

[Grid Iron] to engage creatively and influentially with the shifting dynamics of the contemporary Scottish theatre scene and with identity politics in Scotland in the aftermath of devolution' (2013, p.178). It emerged as Harrison's reaction against the proscenium arch and his resulting quest for a new, more meaningful experience for audiences and theatre-makers alike. He describes how, after his experience at the Edinburgh International Festival and Festival Fringe, he was 'wondering why [they] didn't use the extraordinary buildings of [the] city, both landscapes and topographies, both outside and inside', drawing him to the already established but not yet mainstream aesthetics of site-specific theatre (2014). The politics of site-specificity further deepened his engagement with this movement, since, when staging at non-theatre venues, 'you're immediately and implicitly challenging all the structures that create [...] theatres', especially in promenade work, which challenges the idea of the audience sitting passively, simply absorbing material similarly to a classroom or TV-room context (2014). Empowering the audience and transgressing traditional boundaries, then, became crucial in Grid Iron's understanding of site-specific theatre. This relates back to the immediate historical background of the late 1990s when devolution reshaped power structures in the UK, and the Internet, as Harrison observes, 'has made people feel, which is an illusion really, that they are more in control, particularly of culture' (2014).

Grid Iron's other pillar, the text, has been essential since their very first production, and unlike most of Scotland's site-specific works, several of Grid Iron's original playtexts have been published commercially (for example *Decky Does a Bronco* [2000] and *Variety* [2002], both written by Douglas Maxwell). Besides staging new writing commissions, the company has also adapted classics, created collages and devised productions involving the cast and crew members. The relationship between site and text, however, constitutes the dynamics of the productions, and

as Harrison explains, '[w]hen you get it right, this magic chemistry happens, where both the site and the text or the concept are much greater than they would be otherwise' (2014). Therefore, the site serves as an interpretative framework for the text, which in return transforms the physicality of the place into an imaginary landscape, thus creating an ephemeral and intimate experience for audiences.

Grid Iron's early projects, *The Bloody Chamber* (1997) and *Gargantua* (1998), achieved this chemistry by choosing private spaces (with access for ordinary citizens highly restricted), as the venue for texts with magical realist elements. *The Bloody Chamber*, an adaptation of Angela Carter's novella by the same name based on Charles Perrault's 'Bluebeard' was staged at Mary King's Close beneath Edinburgh's Royal Mile during the 1997 Festival Fringe. The dark, supposedly haunted chambers hidden next to one of the city's busiest landmarks provided an intimate yet eerie space for the exploration of sexuality, repression and redemption through Carter's magical realist classic. At the Fringe the following year, *Gargantua* examined the concepts of Carnival and Lent, translated as workdays and weekends into contemporary terms, partly devised using the actors' personal stories about food and partly based on François Rabelais's sixteenth-century *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* novels. The performances took place in an old bank building, itself connoting a strict work ethic and wealth accumulation, which *Gargantua* ironically transformed into a joyous theatre venue, juxtaposing hedonism and Calvinism, desire and austerity in the production.

The last Grid Iron shows of the decade, *Monumental* (1999) and *Decky Does a Bronco* (2000), demonstrate an organic development from the style and subject matter of the early pieces into a different aesthetic direction. *Monumental*,

scripted by Anita Sullivan, stages a Scottish teenager (Mel) guided through the city of Moscow's past and present by Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's reanimated statue (Vlad). Sullivan dramatises the confusing co-presence of tsarist, Soviet and capitalist landmarks, juxtaposing the city's current embracing of triumphant Western-style consumerism with the monuments of another world order turned into empty signifiers. For Sullivan, 'the very position of Mayakovsky's statue staring out defiantly at the Stalin Towers and McDonald's' was a moment of epiphany during her own tour of the city, leading to an understanding of how Moscow's 'political past was a living pulse, imbedded not just in the architecture but in how people think and feel' (2014). The characters' tour of the city parallels Walter Benjamin's psychogeography, as the route they follow is defined with minuscule accuracy on the real map by constant references to street names and metro stations. Still, the physicality of the places is blurred by Mel and Vlad's transcendence of time, travelling back and forth between the 1920s and the 1990s; much of *Monumental's* dynamics rely on Vlad's vivid personal recollection of the city in the 1920s, allowing Mel to penetrate the iconic spaces of the past and thus giving an active and productive role to memory.

Monumental's interest in the physicality of the past and its plot of a young Westerner's voyeuristic penetration into Russia's landscapes of memory seemed to call for the play to be staged as a site-specific production, and Grid Iron chose Glasgow's Citizens Theatre and the surrounding streets to stage it. Ben Harrison explains:

[t]he two reasons [they] did it there are because the Citizens Theatre has got a lot of statues in its foyer, and the play is very predicated on the idea of a statue coming to life, and also [they] felt the Gorbals housing estate would look like a Stalinist housing project (Harrison, 2014).

This recreation of historic and contemporary Moscow in Glasgow, also reinforced by the Clydeside's important working-class heritage and the Gorbals' functionalist architecture, resulted in an eclectic but mainly promenade production. After the scenes staged in the Citizens Theatre's foyer, the bar, the scene-dock and stage, the cast and the audience were to advance to the adjacent streets where unexpectedly, local children from the housing estates awaited them. As Sullivan describes the experience,

The kids became an impromptu part of the show, a mob: 'you can say what you like to the audience, but no touching and no spitting'. They were interested enough in what was happening to stick to those basic rules. And for the rest of the run, sometimes some of them would drop in, take part, make noise, disappear into the night. Or hang about and watch (Sullivan, 2014).

In Harrison's opinion, the 'promenade didn't support the play [...], it was odd'. However, the experience of leaving the sealed, private spaces of the earlier performances and venturing into a public space with unexpected elements such as the Gorbals' children proved to be fruitful for Grid Iron; when devising their subsequent productions, they were specifically looking for similarly public spaces (Harrison, 2014).

Decky Does a Bronco, written by Douglas Maxwell and premièred at Brodie Park in Paisley on 28 June 2000, is not only arguably Grid Iron's most memorable production, but is a key event in the trajectory of Scottish site-specific theatre. The media attention around the production's 2000 premièred was without precedent, as Harrison explains:

The papers were saying things like 'this production revolutionises the idea of what makes a stage.' It was a big paper, and quite a big

statement to make. These comments would not be made about our work now (Harrison, 2014).

The reason for this attention was the production's perfectly achieved symbiosis between the outdoor space (a swing park) as site, and Maxwell's daring multi-layered text responding to it, merging comedy and tragedy, and inviting its audiences' own childhood memories to the performance in the first part while dramatising the aftermath of a child's rape and murder in the second. The surviving children's abrupt rite of passage to adulthood by this tragic loss of innocence is in sharp contrast not only to the more light-hearted first part and the memories it evokes from the audience, but also to the found space of a functioning swing park with real children playing in it, as Reid observes, creating 'a kind of palimpsest of memory and nostalgia' (2013, p.180).

The search for the adequate site took Grid Iron's creative team across the West Coast of Scotland and the Isle of Skye, where Harrison had a defining moment of epiphany when interacting with local children, which he recalls as follows:

[A]s we left, a twelve-year-old girl called after us and said, 'Just remember, it's our swing park!' It was a very profound moment for me because we thought we got to seal the park for our audience, we can't have those kids coming in and disrupting the play but she made us realise that of course it was their space, it was designed for them so then we kept it very open (Harrison, 2014).

As a result (and learning from *Monumental's* street scenes), the ownership of the site was designed to be democratic and inclusive, allowing daily life outside the performance to penetrate the show. This provided audiences with a double-sided referential framework since it lent a much higher

degree of realism to the experience, while the innocence of real children also stood in contrast to the horrifying fictional events discussed in the second act. Thus, the fluid borders of the site simultaneously served as an almost Brechtian distancing effect and a tool for audience immersion.

Decky Does a Bronco's opening monologue celebrates the swing park as a landscape of childhood memory, acting 'as a key in a lock for the memories of the audience. They are each in their own playground' (Maxwell, 2013). The audience's gaze is not directed at this point; they are left to immerse themselves in the site-specific experience. With this, Maxwell seeks to evoke and project the landscapes of individual audience members' memories onto the found space, thus personalising the whole experience through the text-site relationship. The initial stage directions also describe a distancing element: the silhouette of the giant adult swings specifically created for the show, evoking gallows or Golgotha. This prominent element in the production design, 'a huge scratchy alien spider', looks even more threatening from the audience's perspective as the very small seats placed in a circle around the swings created the illusion of shrinking (Maxwell, 2011, p.13). This is a reminder of the perception of the world lost while growing up, and a symbol for the characters' abrupt rite of passage into adulthood, which prematurely deprives them of childhood innocence but will never permit their integration into adult society.

The critical and commercial success of *Decky Does a Bronco*, then, is the result of Grid Iron's years of experimentation with sites and texts. The innovative and confident management of the found space's properties, both practical and symbolic, reached a point where they fully matched the dynamics of Maxwell's play. In this perfect chemistry, the physicality of the swing park was essential in establishing a memory play framework and immersion for

audiences, whereas the juxtaposition of nostalgic recollection and the tragedy of child abuse in the structure of the plot created diverse imaginary landscapes from the simple setting. Therefore, the production transcended the sum of its parts and it became an organic, intimate theatrical experience.

Conclusion

Growing out of Test Dept, Angus Farquhar's NVA proved to have a long-lasting influence on the Scottish arts scene in spite of their cyclical redefinition of focus and methodology. Leaving their initial commitment to direct political struggle and agitprop behind, they turned to cross-media collaborations to pioneer global digital connectivity, but by the end of the 1990s, they abandoned cyberspace to explore the possibility of a spiritual reconnection with nature. Since then, their multidisciplinary approach to productions and installations has been much less theatrical, and Farquhar began to label their projects as public art instead of site-specific theatre. With Ben Harrison's *Grid Iron*, a new and strongly theatrical response to sites emerged, partly as the company director's reaction against the proscenium arch. In their quest for unusual venues and matching literary texts, they pioneered the symbiosis of contemporary Scottish writing and staging at public spaces, culminating in *Decky Does a Bronco*, thus establishing a performance mode still identified by many as mainstream site-specificity, inspiring companies such as David Leddy's *Fire Exit*, *Poorboy* or *Highway Diner*.

When analysing a later NVA production, *Half Life* (2007), Zerdy observes how Farquhar's company 'directs our attention not only to the politics layered into any representation [...] of the external world but also to the more-than-human entities whose presence, growth, and decay forge the conditions that make [...] Scotland tangible' (2014, p.103). This political subtext and the sense of

tangibility she identifies in *Half Life* are even more powerful in the productions analysed in this article. From *The Second Coming's* industrial yard to *Decky Does a Bronco's* real children in the park, site-specificity in the 1990s responded to a rapidly changing new Scottish reality by finding alternative venues, building communities and projecting a possible, and, through site-specificity, a tangible political future for the country.

Notes

1. Joanne Tompkins explains that 'site-specific performance was a significant form of theatre internationally in the 1990s' so the empowerment of site-specificity in the decade cannot be regarded as a uniquely Scottish phenomenon (2012, p.6). However, as the article argues, Scotland's political context of the 1990s, particularly devolution, fuelled the movement and contributed to its development in a unique way.

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