



Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court An Evaluation of Lyndsay's Theatrical Time Machine

A. Introduction

Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis* (A Satire of the Three Estates) is one of only two surviving sixteenth century Scottish plays and is both dramaturgically innovative and challenging in political terms. It considers a failure of Scottish Governance and the impoverishment of the commonwealth through abuse of power and self-interest. The second half of the play lays out a reforming solution, inspired by God's revenging angel and engineered by a Parliament of the Three Estates. The play was said to have lasted over eight hours and was only performed twice, both outdoors, in Cupar, Fife in 1552 and in Edinburgh in 1554 where the audience included Mary of Guise. (1)

"A piece of theatre which challenges everything we think theatre is" Professor Greg Walker, University of Edinburgh

'Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court' was a two year, AHRC funded interdisciplinary research project which staged *A Satire of the Three Estates* as part of a wider investigation of the Scottish Renaissance and Stewart court in relation to modern images of national identity, and the Scottish past. At the heart of the project is the first ever full-length production of *The Three Estates* on the Peel at Linlithgow, in June 2013 that brought together 40 of Scotland's most talented actors. The play went on to be shortlisted for the CATS (Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland) Best Ensemble Award 2013-14. There were also performances in the Great Halls in Linlithgow Palace and Stirling Castle of the 'lost' first version of the play (The Interlude), first performed at Linlithgow in 1540. The project, led by Professor Greg Walker and Dr Eleanor Rycroft of the University of Edinburgh, and Professor Thomas Betteridge of Brunel University, brought together academics from across the U.K with archaeologists and historical interpreters from Historic Scotland and professional theatre and film-makers, including theatre director Gregory Thompson and television director, Richard Jack.



The team employed a wide range of techniques to involve people with a professional, academic or creative interest in the subject. A specialist outside event broadcast company was contracted to provide High Definition digital video content for the open access website. This multi-platform approach also succeeded in engaging with people with more limited knowledge of the Renaissance Court and of the play through community and outreach work involving community groups, an amateur theatre company, and schools.

The result has been an awakening of interest that will provide a resource for historians, theatre practitioners, educators, academics and local people for years to come. The impact of the project lies in a recognition by all participants, from Director to community participant, of the contemporary relevance of the themes of the play, along with an excitement in the power and accessibility of the language. Both of these qualities have lain dormant within the text, only coming to life through the creative processes of production and performance.

The project also contrasted the 2013 production with earlier revivals, particularly the shortened Edinburgh International Festival presentation of 1948, directed by Tyrone Guthrie. A comparison which demonstrated how the play, when presented as a whole, addresses contemporary issues and anxieties meaningfully for a diverse range of participants and audience. (3)

The legacy of 'Staging the Scottish Court' is far-reaching. The project is embedded in a publicly accessible online document of research, video, commentary and debate. Training resources address Scottish theatre history, older Scottish language and dialect, and the performance skills needed to bring them to life. An education toolkit supports teachers in linking the play with the school curriculum.



It is, however, in the transformative effect of the play on project participants where the most exciting legacy will develop. The ensemble of actor's interest and technical know-how relating to the period has been re-energised into clear ambition to continue to explore the work. Audiences and stakeholders now recognise that while the text provides the words, the performance provides meaning. Most importantly *Satire of the Three Estates* in its full version has been reclaimed as living culture, relevant to contemporary Scottish lives.

"An extraordinarily bold piece of theatre.....(that) raises profound questions about the nature of monarchy, (and) the role of the popular voice in Scottish politics....." Alex Salmond, First Minister 2007 -2014

"It is the greatest play to come out of Scotland until the modern period."
Michael Mackenzie (Merchand)

B. Overview

The production was presented so as to correspond as closely as possible to the C16th performances and offer contemporary audiences a direct experience of how the play worked in a dramatic sense and as political theatre. This rested on a platform of 'Practice-based research' aimed at generating additional forms of knowledge to that provided by literary, archival or archaeological enquiry.

Assumptions	That practice based research will reveal previously unrecognised knowledge	That an unexpurgated staging of the original text will enhance our understanding of the period	That the techniques required of the creative team will enhance their professional practice
	That the authentic production and setting would expand interest in theatre of the period	That opportunities for event based heritage tourism would emerge	That the project would provide a platform for a range of learning outcomes
Resources	AHRC grant funding	Historic Scotland support	Higher Education resources
Activities	Theatre production and presentation in multiple settings	Dramaturgy, research and an associated seminar	Community outreach and education work
Outputs	A performance of the full length production Linlithgow Palace	A 33 page educational toolkit with CPD seminar, with results captured in an evaluation report	A 90 hour Workshop Programme with 64 participants from 5 FE & 1 HE Departments
	Performances of the 'lost' version of the play at Stirling Castle and the Great Hall at Linlithgow Palace	Video recordings of the performances, filmed interviews with the creative team, and subsequent symposia	Interactive online website and social media through the life of the project. An ongoing online information resource.
Outcomes	Insights into the history of the period and awareness of the significance of the play's first performances	A more thorough understanding of the text and the value of presenting the full text	A better understanding of audience reactions and how to engage audiences with Scots language
	Technical and professional development for the creative team	Measures to overcome barriers to engaging with the text - length, dialect, and historical context	An all round theatrical training resource: Scottish theatre history; Older Scots language & dialect; performance skills.
Impact	Scope to expand a successful cross sectoral partnership involving theatre, heritage, & digital production	Scope to continue to explore performance, production and promotion techniques to support future projects	Scope to develop an ongoing event at Linlithgow Palace to reach new audiences and support cultural tourism



C. Learning

The **creative process** was unusual in that it brought together actors and academics to explore the full potential of the text for audiences, practitioners and historians. Freeing the production from commercial constraints meant that the playability could be tested out through the production process. This also meant that assumptions about the play's significance in terms of national and individual identity would be examined at a time when Scottish people were actively involved with political process and uncertainties.

The key to unlocking the play was the work to bring it to performance, and this process was recorded in detail through a blog and video recordings. The blog provides a sequential insight into how most elements of the production were developed. The rehearsal diary, for example, includes a video of a reading of Folly's sermon in full. Participants describe how their preconceptions about the accessibility of the language and historic remoteness were overturned. Time and again the play was described as 'rich' in ideas and material for today's creative practitioners. The play required a move away from naturalistic performance with actors needing to be 'bigger' than when in the theatre. The staging also needed to be rethought in terms of the outside location and length of play.

"The text is so rich..... if the actor understands those words..... they become not as remote as they appear to be on the page" Gerda Stevenson (Good Counsel)

"Having an academic knowledge gives you a clearer sense of what the writing means" Jimmy Chisholm (Dissait)

"I first encountered the play in.... the early 80's..... being young I thought the play represented the establishment, old fashioned, wasn't relevant.... It was a revelation to be involved in this production.....suddenly becoming aware of this amazing piece of theatre" Gerry Mulgrew (Folly)

The Further Education Workshop programme took place in early 2014. A programme of consultation identified three areas of resistance to engaging with the text: inaccessible and dense text due to lack of contextual knowledge; too Scottish in dialect; and too long for preparatory reading. Most participants did not have experience of the techniques employed in large scale outdoor performance and the “bigger”, more theatrical style required. The workshop programme tackled these issues by concentrating on two of Lindsay’s key questions (“What is ane King?” and “What makes the poor?”) as a way of drawing contemporary parallels. This was followed up with training exercises that revealed themes and characters.

As a result participants had the means to both speak the dialect and to draw out meaning from the work by the time they first encountered the text. Performance style was developed through a process of exaggerating participants own responses to the text and characters.

The workshops successfully introduced participants to the play and its context, with the majority intending to follow up with study, reading and using the project materials. Half of them subsequently intended to use the play as a source for monologue audition pieces and a large proportion reported gaining increased confidence and new acting skills through working with the text. A Workshop CPD Seminar in March 2014 introduced 15 participants (lecturers, drama teachers, tutors, actors, guides and students) to the *Satire of the Three Estates* Toolkit, a resource to disseminate project output into educational provision for Scotland. A documentary film charted the Community Outreach Programme and was shot by participants and organised in six chapters. Initial concerns about “*how would I make sense of it*” were replaced by a recognition of contemporary relevance.

“it didn’t feel like all those years ago”

“it sparked an interest in Scottish history again”

“it’s quite funny”

“you brought it alive in the workshops” Community outreach participants

“this is our King, we bow down to a lying scumbag” Community outreach participant’s performance based on the play



The Three Estates International Symposium was held between 6-8th June 2014 at the University of Edinburgh. The symposium included: 12 presentations in 5 sessions; an actors workshop led by the Director of the production; attendance of a performance of the interlude at Stirling Castle; and a closing Round Table discussion. The symposium articulated a common set of findings that applied to the creative and academic team, and to stakeholders. There was also a discussion panel on the play and its modern legacy at the Scottish Parliament. Participants in this event included the creative team and Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs in the Scottish Government. A video recording of the debate forms part of the online document for the project, and a twitter 'storify' of the whole play in modern English (<https://storify.com/nsimonova7/international-satire-of-the-three-estates-symposiu-1>) was produced alongside the events of 2014. The project had proven to be a revelation for almost everyone involved. Even participants that were knowledgeable about the play and the period were struck by the reach, power and relevance of the work when realised in the production process.

"I was amazed when I read it...this play started out as a morality play, it then becomes an historical drama, then a domestic comedy... it's a sort of Brechtian drama....it then becomes a verbatim play of parliament..... it's stand-up comedy at the end. I was just amazed at the dramatic imagination" Gregory Thompson, Director

Key points

- a. It is important to produce and perform work to successfully engage people in drama from different periods.
- b. The contemporary meaningfulness of the play arises from performing the entirety.
- c. The language is easy to comprehend when spoken out loud, and not just read.
- d. The project raises questions about how we introduce children to theatre texts.
- e. Secondary school teachers have to overcome a lack of time and knowledge.
- f. Evaluation suggests that packaging the toolkit and CPD offer as a Theatre in Education Project and adopting a mentored approach to introducing the play would improve take up and impact with teachers and schools.
- g. The project leaves a strong legacy for theatre training and education. The Further Education Workshop programme attracted 64 drama students/ actors over a six week period.
- h. The creative team have been inspired to use the play in their contemporary work.
- i. The academic legacy arises from the transformative effect of working with the production and the actors and in learning so much from the production process.
- j. The research and its contribution to developing theatre practice will have a long term impact for scholars and theatre professionals.



D. People and place

An exploration of ways to attract new audiences to historic sites was a key aim of the project. Historic Scotland invested in the work, and secured unprecedented access to Linlithgow Peel for performance of the piece. The play in performance was of a scale and impact that both cast and audience referred to as an event rather than as just a piece of theatre. It was through the realisation of the text that Lyndsay's artistry and skill became clear, along with a demonstration of how effectively his work reaches contemporary audiences.

"Playing the Satire whole also demonstrates how Lyndsay structures his scenes for maximum audience engagement, repeatedly introducing a new character at a key moment, just as a mood and tone have been established, to shift the dynamics of the action and introduce new aesthetic effects, new pleasures for spectators which vary the audience experience and enrich the implications of the unfolding drama." (3)

The response of both audience and actors indicates that the format of the performance successfully engaged audiences and that the length of the performance was not a problem. The informality of the setting, with the audience free to promenade and shift attention from one part of the staging to another, and to eat and drink when they wanted, meant that attention was retained despite the unfamiliar language. Lyndsay's stage directions reveal an awareness of this need for both a more informal environment and switching of attention at different points in the play. His approach has proved effective today, when playing times in theatres are much shorter, and giving testament to the longevity of theatre-craft and the value in rediscovering interrupted traditions.

"you don't have to know everything to know something" Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary

The community and outreach programme set out to involve local people in the project, and to explore the potential of the work as a platform for developing an awareness of local historical knowledge and its relevance to life today. The project also worked with The Linlithgow Players, the local amateur dramatic group, to stage *The Interlude* by David Lindsay at the Satire Conference in Stirling Castle in June 2014. This strand of work involved 13 participants working on a weekly basis, including sessions with the outreach team. The group were used to performing re-enactments, and a coaching programme was devised to refocus away from issues like the historical accuracy of costumes and on to the qualities of the play that transcended time, making the play relevant today. This production of the *Interlude* will be staged annually as part of the Players' annual programme at Linlithgow Palace, forming a new aspect of Palace's interpretational offering.

"the setting reminds you of what the play is rooted in" Jimmy Chisholm (Dissait)

"it's like a whole new language..... you don't get a chance to work outside very often"
Anjelee D'Arcee (The Prioress)

"if you did the production in a confined space I don't think the audience concentration would be the same..... the audience didn't feel confined or trapped..... five and a half hours didn't seem to be a problem..... this was a real eye opener" Gerda Stevenson (Good Counsel)

"the longer version is an event rather than theatre" Kern Falkner (Sargeant)

"I can't believe that in all my life I never came here (to Linlithgow Palace)" Community project participant

Key points

- a. Theatre works as a time machine when it comes to place making with local people.
- b. Audiences respond well to authentic cultural heritage.
- c. Cultural heritage resonates with visitors when situated in original settings.
- d. The play offers a rich resource to develop practical links between cultural tourism and historic destinations.
- e. The project suggests innovative approaches to connecting local people, place and heritage.
- f. Large scale events on historic sites act as a driver for audiences.
- g. The application of digital technology reaches to a much wider audience.
- h. There is potential to innovate with use of technology in touring and in event based screenings.
- i. Online resources support cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary working.
- j. Online resources widen engagement with cultural heritage.



E. Scotland Today

Knowledge of both **Scottish and theatre history** was enhanced through the project. The hypothesis of Staging and Representing the Scottish Court was that a full presentation of the play would provide a more meaningful experience for participants and audience, both in terms of contemporary Scottish theatre practice, but also in an exploration of current political and social issues. Professor Greg Walker (3) points to a range of themes that connect C16th and C21st Scottish audiences, including: national identity; good governance; economic malpractice; the causes and consequences of poverty; and the misdemeanours and responsibilities of governors and churchmen.

The previous history of the play is informative. Although rarely performed, what was known about the play was based upon edited versions, and particularly the abbreviated version directed by Tyrone Guthrie in 1948, where *Satire of the Three Estates* was 'triumphantly reclaimed as a piece of living theatre' (3). The original Sandy Solace from 1948, Jamie Stuart, attended twice and introduced the final performance with a speech and Solace's opening lines. Members of the original audiences for the 1948 production also attended the performances and shared memories and photographs with the project team.

A video interview with Jamie Stuart reveals that the 1948 cast, assembled from across Scotland's repertory and touring theatre companies, were apprehensive about archaic language, despite their familiarity with the dialect. However, just as in 2013, the animated script and contemporary relevance excited and inspired the company. An interview with Jamie Reid-Baxter, an early theatre and Scottish Literature expert, confirms these points. He describes the political urgency of the piece as revealed through the staging and the dramatic appeal and earthiness of the Middle Scots tongue.

The staging of the complete work proved to be important. A combination of factors, including financial viability and assumptions about audience taste, meant that the length of the Guthrie production was severely cut to about a third of the original length. Most of the more political second half was removed along with the script's profanity and perceived 'bible thumping'. The overall effect was to emphasise comedic and entertaining qualities rather than the political and moral aspects of the play. The 2013 production re-established characters and the full text to provide the emotional and moral balance at the heart of the play. This allowed the audience and participants to recognise and consider the many parallels with contemporary Scotland.

AHRC funding meant that the commercial constraints on size of cast and length of performance that Tyrone Guthrie experienced did not apply and the project was a unique opportunity to bring 40 of Scotland's most accomplished actors together. The cast's knowledge of the Scots language and more physical theatre traditions revealed insights into the meaning of the text through the rehearsal process. For example Jimmy Chisholm referenced pantomime in his reading of the role of Vice, calling Flatterie, Falset and Dissait "*little pantomime creatures... they're pixies*". For Tam Dean Burn, another cast member, the rehearsal period was a reminder of 1980's political street theatre. This view was echoed in the academic work of the project. Here, the production revealed the significance of the play's radicalism, with the anger of the common people at abuse of power and a venal clergy informing the laying out of a comprehensive manifesto of reform.

However, it was the device of **The Pauper** that was most powerfully reclaimed by the project. While the practice of introducing a character from the audience was not uncommon at the time, in the case of *The Pauper* it is used to unsettle the audience, making a transition from the theatrically focused first half of the play to a politically focused second. This foregrounding of the common man is considered as unique to *Satire of the Three Estates* and only reappears in the theatre of the modern period.

A number of participants, from actors to teachers in the education programme, pointed to the historic, dramaturgical and educational value of **comparison with Shakespeare**. On the one hand Shakespeare was a near-contemporary of Lyndsay, and both writers shared a number of techniques. On the other their approach to theatre's role in the world was completely different. Whereas Shakespeare's dilemmas are resolved by authority figures, mostly kings or members of the aristocracy, Lyndsay offers us the voice and ethical perspective of the common man, and a more ambiguous conclusion that places the responsibility for resolution with the audience.

The project resonated strongly in 2013 and 2014, at a **time of intense political debate** and democratic engagement in Scotland associated with the Independence Referendum campaign. Key figures from three of our contemporary 'Estates' (politicians, the broadcast media and local community) became advocates for the play and the need to continue to present this work. The project successfully uncovered a mid-sixteenth century Scottish court that was open to debate in ways not found in other Renaissance courts. Furthermore that debate shared a common dialect and idiolect in Older Scots that connected all the characters of the play, from King to tailor.

"you got totally embroiled in the language, the real fire of it, the danger of it.... it asked serious questions of society and even the King" George Aza-Selinger (National Theatre of Scotland) describing the project in relation to the debate about what makes a Scottish Play

"theatre has taught me more about history than my formal education" Paul Cunningham (Temporality)

"it's about the abuse of power and the way poor people have been left out.....not a lot has changed in 400 years" Michael Mackenzie (Merchand)

"I couldn't get over how relevant it is.....(I) have been researching and writing a radio play on homelessness..... and kept thinking about the Three Estates and the character of the Poor Man" Gerda Stevenson (Good Counsel)

"Liz Lochhead and Ian Heggie loved it.....an inspiration for modern day Scottish writers" Gerry Mulgrew (Folly)

"I've found out what type of friendships I want" Kimberly, Youth Inclusion Project

Key Points

- a. The play is easily understood by contemporary audiences and performers without the aid of programme notes.
- b. The materiality of the language remains a point of entry for audiences and professionals, emphasising a shared cultural heritage.
- c. Theatre is a powerful and alternative lens onto history that enhances our understanding of a period and complements other forms of research.
- d. Comparing and contrasting with Shakespeare is useful in broadening our perspective on the period, on theatre, and on how theatre comes down to us.
- e. The play demonstrated how the past can inform our understanding of, and engagement with current events.



F. What next?

The next phase of the project will look to further explore 'practice-based research' concerning Renaissance theatre at the European level. It will explore the theoretical underpinnings and techniques for the staging of Renaissance theatre. It will also consider the opportunities for audience engagement arising from current approaches to heritage management and through the digital communication of live events. The project team will look to widen the scope of the project to include partners from different sectors, such as Scottish Screen Archive, and from across Europe, such as academic and theatre partners with a strong interest in drama of the period. This phase of work will aim to make a major contribution to Scotland's Year of Heritage 2017.

The work will begin with the preparation of an investment strategy that will include:

- a. pump-priming for pre-development from the partners.
- b. project funding for the development period.
- c. EU funding for a European partnership project that includes innovation in digital practice, cultural tourism, and theatre production amongst its aims.

Participants and stakeholders have emphasised the value of continuing and developing the project from multiple perspectives:

- The richness and size of the text provides an ongoing research resource. Staging and Representing the Renaissance Court has begun to demonstrate the significance of the play to historical and dramaturgical research, opening rich seams of knowledge that can be explored through new research partnerships. For example the insights gained from comparison with Shakespeare's work indicate that wider comparisons with playwrights from other European courts of the period would be likely to develop our understanding of both the dramaturgical and political workings of the time.

- The play has proven to be an excellent platform for training and skills development in the theatre professions. Participants point to positive impacts on their performance techniques, script writing and understanding of theatre history. The success of the training element of the project can be expanded, both nationally and internationally. *The Satire of the Three Estates* owes much of its impact to French theatrical techniques, and collaboration with practitioners in France and elsewhere in Europe could provide a new training resource for use at all educational levels.
- The project made extensive use of digital technology to record and communicate content, from performances, to interviews, to historic and research material, to toolkits for schools and community. A specific evaluation of this element of the project with users could usefully inform future developments. Great progress has been made in successfully translating live performance into both event cinema and streamed content. Developments in community cinema are introducing these events to communities in a wide variety of locations, from central London to the Western Isles of Scotland. Continuing to develop our understanding of the techniques required to translate historic drama that is rarely seen could make a major impact on audience engagement with cultural heritage.
- The potential to establish the play as a regular, even annual, feature of the Scottish cultural and visitor calendar was commented on by a number of participants and stakeholders. The production made for an event that could have wide appeal in much the same way as, for example, the Mystery Plays in York, Chester and Coventry. However, the prohibitive costs of such a long and large production and the risks for major open air productions mean that this would need to be further tested out through a feasibility study.

G. References

- (1) <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Image-Gallery/2013-Gallery/Pages/Three-Estates.aspx>
- (2) <http://www.stagingthescottishcourt.org>.
- (3) 'Reflections on Staging Sir David Lyndsay's *Satire of the Three Estates* at Linlithgow Palace, June 2013', Greg Walker, *Scottish Literary Review*, Volume 5, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2013, pp. 1-22 (Article) Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies
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