

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Ian McDiarmid – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor. Auditions; censorship; drama school; directing; Scottish theatre.

Please note: due to audio quality, some portions of this interview are incomplete.

EJ: First I'd be interested to know more about your move into acting, I understand you started studying Psychology before you changed your course? Was there a particular event that triggered this?

IM: I suppose yes and no. When I was very young, about five, my mother and father took me to the Palace Theatre in Dundee, where I was born and brought up, and there was a variety show, to see Tommy Morgan, a Scots comic. I didn't know if I was going to like it, and I remember them talking about whether it was suitable or not. But my uncle got us tickets to see that. I didn't know what I was going to, and I went and I... what I saw, I found completely fascinating. It's almost a bit scary. I suppose that was the beginning of it, not so much the idea of 'oh, I want to do that' but 'there's a bit of that in me'. I suppose one way or another it took quite a long time to surface and I also took quite a long time to find the courage to actually do it. Or say it. [...] But that didn't happen until I was in my early twenties, because I went to University first, because I had to have the appropriate qualifications and all my friends did. That also put me in touch with the fact that there was something I wanted to do, some kind of thing inside me, later perhaps. So I went to University, scraped a degree, and then decided I would apply to various drama schools in Scotland, then I was accepted into the Royal Scottish Academy and I was off really, for the first time I was working with people who were doing what I wanted to do. [...]

That was in 1968. Students all over Europe were overthrowing the institutions... we didn't quite manage that, we got Glasgow involved. There was a real feeling that teachers had to teach. I don't know if that justified the position. People couldn't sit back. [...] So it was quite an exciting time to be starting out on a path.

EJ: Could you give me some details on the application procedure? Was it auditions?

IM: First of all, I didn't know much about professional theatre, I had been a member of local theatre society, no-one had been very encouraging about what you do, so I had to write off and make various enquiries myself. And I thought really the only place was RADA in London, and I did audition for them, and they were very impressive but I had

no money, so even if they'd accepted me - which they didn't - I wouldn't have been able to pay for it. I rather hoped there'd be a bursary in the offing or something. Then I went to Bristol Old Vic, and Nat Brennan was in charge then, and again he was very helpful but he said he couldn't take on another student and I couldn't afford the fees and wouldn't get a grant from the University, and he said, 'why on earth don't you try for your local drama school?' And the reason I hadn't started there is I wanted to get out of Scotland! I wanted to make a clean break, in every sense, so I did audition for that, about a year later when I'd earned some money, I think, to pay my way through. And their fees were cheaper than everywhere else, so I thought I was in with a chance, and I had enough money for about the first year. And I did audition, and I did the most unsuitable...better than I did for RADA. For RADA I did Richard II and Alfie: it couldn't have been more contrasting and it couldn't have been less suitable. Richard perhaps slightly, but Alfie, not at all! And the nerve to do that play, with that London accent for that character! I think they were staggered at by the nerve, but it was a foolish choice. But for the Royal Scottish Academy I did a piece from Uncle Vanya: Astroff - not such a good choice, Vanya would have been better, wouldn't it? [laughs] but I'd seen Olivier do it and I thought he was great. So I suppose in a way, I copied him, thinking that's what you perhaps had to do, to make your mark. Then there was another piece I rather liked - I've just remembered it now, talking to you - by Adamov, Professor Taranne. Interesting, but not terribly wonderful play from the Absurdist school. I did it for the board. And they said 'How interesting that you should take two pieces that are so contrasting and yet you've made them sound so similar!' [laughs] So, no, they wrote back and said 'You can start if you can pay the fees', so I paid the fees for the first year and the then-principal, the late Colin Chandler who was extremely good to me, arranged for me to work for a bursary for the first year [...]

EJ: What was the atmosphere like in the school at the time? What kind of teaching was it?

IM: It was very interesting. As I say, I was very pleased to be there and doing all the kind of things that we do, learning how to be a good actor, not how to become one. [...] learning more about what it's like, and how you might be better... So I did all those classes, voice, fencing, that was new and interesting. Although it was like school, an extension of school, it was exciting. Because you were working on plays. But they kept you away from plays in the first year. You have to somehow earn it. You get to act scenes but never whole plays. It was immensely frustrating, but it built up huge expectation of what it might be like to actually get on the stage with some people. We did that in our second year. I think we felt all the time, that... there were some good teachers there and there were some bad ones. People who we felt, perhaps mistakenly, who were there because they hadn't made a successful career either an actor or in another sphere. But then there were people who were quite inspired, and quite inspiring as a result. I sort of latched on to them. I suppose at the same time there was a huge frustration, you wanted to know what it was like 'out there' and none of the people who were teaching us could actually tell us. Occasionally we had visiting teachers who were actors, who we sort of fell upon on for information. What they said was a contrast to what we were being taught. It wasn't exactly contradictory but it was a different way of thinking and one that made more sense to us. There was an actor called John Scarborough, he was very useful: he was very down to earth, very specific, he said you'd be very lucky to find a job when you leave, you should take what you're offered immediately - that was the kind of realism we wanted to here. Then there were people like Ian Richardson, Frank Findlay from the National, they came along. [...] Tyrone

Guthrie, who was doing a production at the Citizens. [...] He was a fountain of knowledge. Then you felt you were really learning. They were very helpful and friendly [...] It was three years, which we felt was long, we wouldn't have felt it was long if we could actually get out and act, we felt then that two was enough, but we may have been wrong. There was also a television studio there, one of the few in the country in a drama school, but there was no-one really there to teach us or actually work the equipment, so we didn't learn as much as we might have learned, but there was the initial horror of seeing yourself and how terrible you actually were. That was useful to get out of the way early on. I don't think any of us were quite comfortable. It's still an unpleasant experience. You tend to see all the things you should have done and the things you were doing. It was a broad based course but looking back at some of the staff it was good for them but not very much fun for me, but somehow character building and I learnt a lot about myself as well as how to act better.

EJ: Was there a feeling that you were going to move into television or film, or did you predominantly want to become a stage actor?

IM: I think there was a feeling from all of us that we were going to be acting in theatre and not other activities. Somehow film seemed to be so far away, it didn't impinge much [...] It seemed too remote to be possible, rather like the higher reaches of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Somehow they were unattainable. They were there to be attained but they were somehow unattainable. Television was whatever was being made at the time, there was a lot of Scottish stuff. There was nothing there that was going to be the same on stage, in those clothes, that they were dressing us in in rehearsal. I think the aim was to turn out people who wanted to work in the theatre. Throughout the rest of the country. We did feel we were emerging as stage actors.

EJ: Who were your fellow students?

IM: In my particular year, there was my very good friend Denis Lawson, we had been friends before we went to drama school. There was David Hayman, a very good actor and a director of films and for television. And many others and a few others who are currently appearing in Scottish theatre, and a few others who stopped doing it. Some taught, perhaps as a result of being frustrated at either not finding regular work or the kind of work that was good for the soul.

EJ: Was there a draw towards London?

IM: There certainly was. In... The feeling was that that was where everything started, particularly if you had an agent. If you had an agent in London then somehow you would be well-represented, whatever little you'd done, people would take note of, and they'd transmit around you the chance of doing things. Myself, I was very happy to be an actor who was Scots. I didn't want to be a Scottish Actor, just to do Scottish roles. There were some people in college who only wanted to do that and that's fair enough. They wanted to work in Scotland. [...] I've always felt more European than Scottish. You should be open to all these influences and try to be part of them. Just personally, I'd been trying to get out of Scotland in order to do that, to free myself up, my mind and

my sensibility and everything else. I hoped my first job...well, it turned out to be in Scotland in the Scottish Actors' Company...but the second one was in Manchester. [...] The Citizens Theatre, Glasgow - post-68, 69, David Hayman was there and was one of the lead players - sounds hierarchical to talk in those terms - of the company. He played a very revolutionary Hamlet, revolutionary for Scotland, and it appalled the paper, The Scotsman. It made their front pages, they were so infuriated! And Giles said 'At last! A breakthrough!' I didn't see it myself, but David played it as a mentally-disabled man and... it doesn't seem at all revolutionary now! All of the parts were played by men, which was seen as 'deeply shocking and highly unnecessary!' [laughs] So things like that. I wanted to join the company and I did three years later. [...]

It seemed to me that they got all the hard parts right. It seemed to... like a sensory Black Mass. But most people didn't know what they were talking about. I was rather arrogantly thinking, 'They've got all the difficult parts there, maybe I could supply the easy ones?' They didn't want that. They wanted the experience for themselves and the audience to be rather akin to a big rock concert. That was fantastic and necessary at the time. I had the feeling, if only we could sit down and read it before we got up to perform it, it might have better. But this is not patronising to them but they didn't have the real drama school training. Really, because there was no rules. Everyone was thrown in at the glorious deep end of a leading role. Whether or not they were deemed to be fit or ready for it or not. That was just the way they worked. The ones I wasn't ready for was Timon of Athens and Galileo, but I was playing them, in at the deep end, and nervous, you learn to swim. You learn and you surprise yourself in ways that you might not have anticipated. So they offered that to actors and audience. There is always the element of surprise. Not always shock. Kind of on-the-edge excitement. I remember thinking 'why isn't all theatre like this?' whatever cavils I might have had about paying more attention to the text. And the answer was: because most theatre wasn't as daring as they were. Quite simply, Giles and Philip were appointed to the job and they'd come from Watford where they'd done interesting work, and they started doing interesting plays [...] but nobody came, so they did was deemed to be the conventional stuff, Shaw and Shakespeare, and nobody came either. And they weren't going to be thrown out as they still had three years on their contract and Philip said, 'Well, if no-one will come, we might as well do what we want' But of course by doing what they wanted and doing it in their extraordinary and individual way and often extremely well, people did come. The whole of theatre in Scotland was changed forever. [...]

EJ: Was there a traditional Scottish theatre 'scene'?

IM: Well, at that time there was a very strong, as it had been, naturalistic tradition. Bill Bryden wrote a play about the legal office in Glasgow's shipyards. Many really fine Scottish actors were of that tradition. [...] There was also this terrible move towards Scottish Nationalism, not in terms of party politics, which to me was like a Scottish 'narrowing', a self-protecting thing that was erected against the outside world, not just the dreaded English. I just thought, you're fooling yourself, you're kidding yourself, you're scared, so you're concentrating on your own tiny island and pretending there's no other world elsewhere, and it's not much good for you or for Scotland. It's changed a bit since then. Mainly by young writers. So it's quite different from how it was then. Those that were writing were... tended again to be running along nationalistic lines or within the specifically Scottish context. But that's all changed a bit by David Greig, for example, he is European, he has so much blood in him for theatre in Scotland but his first feelings are for outside Scotland.

EJ: I'd say David Harrower too.

IM: David Harrower, indeed, yes.

EJ: Were you drawn to particular roles when you were training? Did you feel a direction towards a certain type of role?

IM: I don't think so really. Actors are desperate not to be cast in a particular line. Because of my features and so on I would be what some people then called a cliched character actor. But I've never really accepted that distinction. We all know what mean by typing. I was always looking for parts that had played in a particular way and that I could play in a... another way. I didn't sort of set out with that objective. When you start you're pleased to be offered things. There's such a wide variety of things, there was no such thing as type-casting then. They were quite perverse at casting then. Jonathan Kent played Cleopatra. Doesn't seem so strange now, Mark Rylance has done it lately, but then it was an extraordinary thing to do. You kept feeling, yes, I think we should always be striving to be extraordinary. Not at the expense of the text, but in alliance with it. Because that is what theatre can do.

EJ: Do you feel that European Theatre has had an influence on how you act?

IM: I think it has, yes. Early on, for no reason I can work out, I was drawn to German Theatre. Brecht. I became so interested, not so much in his philosophy which seemed ever-changing and entirely pragmatic, but by the theatricality of the plays. And having seen some of his work, I mean he didn't direct it himself, the Berliner Ensemble did it and I understood it better and was once again delighted by the provocative theatricality. [...] He was enormously theatrical astute and used all elements. [...]

EJ: Did you have any particular reverence for Shakespeare at the time?

IM: Yes, like everybody I knew he was one of the best, if not the best, and that was because he had an all embracing quality and was full of contradictory surprises. And I had, when I went to hopelessly audition for RADA, in the pouring rain, I booked a seat to get down to Aldwych to see... I think it was The Homecoming but it may have been The Birthday Party, because I've seen both at different times at the Aldwych. Seeing both of those plays, particularly The Homecoming, and knowing that it was the Royal Shakespeare Company, gave me something to aspire to. Every actor I knew wanted to go to the RSC, not just to do Shakespeare, but also to do those great contemporary plays. I think the feeling was, and this was true, it was the best place in the country if you wanted to act. Although the Citizens was all glamorous and wild and exciting, the RSC could take you further. My first encounter with them was the televising of the Wars of the Roses series, which is a nightmare, and I was astonished at the ease at which they did it and the sheer intelligibility, which I always thought was a problem. But seeing The Homecoming had a huge effect on me because I thought, 'I'll never be on that stage with people like that', because that was the standard, the depth of the work. Way

beyond anything I could do. You work towards it, through your twenties, you end up knowing these people. [...] That is still astonishing to me, but seeing that benchmark and seeing how the audiences are totally held and enraptured by Pinter, the force of the play, the actors, the silences they created, that was devastating, to be part of creating that silence. Which is even more extraordinary than listening from the audience.

EJ: Interesting. There's a new production of *The Birthday Party* at the Duchess Theatre, which is supposed to be very good.

IM: Yes. I've wanted to see that very much.

EJ: Did you locate Pinter within the European tradition as well?

IM: I suppose I did without putting it in those terms. I wasn't very good in those days in putting things into terms. I was finding out. I suppose everything was impressionistic. 'Influence' would be too strong a word but these things were battering against my brain and I hoped it was becoming part of what I was. But yes. I loved those plays having read them and seen them, some of them in not very good productions, but the old ones would stand up hugely. The Donmar were thinking of reviving a few, which is a good idea: the Theatre of the Absurd. The humour, which a lot of people didn't understand, and people I knew didn't understand, thought it was just silly. But it's pre-life, pre-everything we're watching on television now: I mean... Surrealism is a cliché. It was a reaction against the narrowness. But I was engaged by that at an early age. Not just because it made me laugh but because it did seem about things, about ideas. I suppose again it was a reaction against my background and narrowness of Dundee, which is literally narrow: it has narrow streets [laughs] But I was looking outside, and I suppose it was instinctive to look to Europe. But there were a lot of Scots who go to Germany and France before they go into acting. [...]

EJ: We tend to have seen *The Birthday Party* as being Absurd. I think it's interesting because I was reading a review of the new production of *The Birthday Party* I think Michael Billington suggests it's a rep. play with trademarks of the fifties potboiler film though written by someone who had read Kafka.

IM: I think there are more people now who understand the nature of theatrical metaphor than before. Going back to Scotland, people back then were saying 'yes, but what does it mean?' and you couldn't come up with a literal answer [...] The notion that you might talk about contradiction and meaning lying in different places and truth being elusive – which is one of the joys of theatre – seemed pretentious or academic [...] The decline of the Church and all the rest of it, the search for meaning. People find meaning more readily in theatre nowadays. But I don't think we find it there often enough, I think. I think we're more inclined to look in art galleries nowadays.

EJ: Did you envisage when you were training as an actor that you'd go on to do directing or producing?

IM: No, I've never wanted to direct. I never did. I sort of felt I should. Only because I'd been critical of quite a lot of directors. When we were asked around the Almeida, I directed a couple of things. [...] And I thought I should have to do it eventually. At that time Jonathan Kent wasn't directing at all, it was his first production, but by watching him and others direct I realised I wasn't a director. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy it, I loved working with the actors and designers but there were other people who could do it better. But I always had this outsider view of a play which wasn't helpful as an actor. Sometimes I'd be the audience of one, to my detriment – I needed to be in the part, not outside it watching the shape. That has been part of my instinct. I think it's got better now, I think I've got it out of system, or rationalised it. It's interesting working on *Lear*, because I know Jonathan so well, I didn't think of anything but the part I was playing and the other actors. I let him worry about absolutely everything else! Because we were working on things together for so long, it was his inclination to come up to me at the end of the day and say, 'What are we going to do about so-and-so?' and I could say, 'Well, not my problem!' [laughs] But of course I didn't, but at the same time, he recognised the importance of protecting that space to yourself and not seeing how it works as a whole on stage but as a protection of your part. But that feeling hasn't disappeared but it doesn't get in the way. I think by directing plays...I've come to terms with that. Another interesting thing about directing was that I think I was quite helpful in rehearsals to people but once it got to a certain stage, I didn't know what to do. All I could think was, 'aren't they amazing!'. I even thought, 'how did they learn their lines?'. [laughs] I couldn't be objective any more. I couldn't pull myself back to look at it as a whole, as a thing I'd been doing. I just saw it and willed it to be good. And when it wasn't, I couldn't tell and didn't want to be aware of it. That's when I just stopped. That I wasn't going to be helpful. I haven't ruled it out completely, but I'd make sure the team of people I was working with were people I knew and knew the things I do.

EJ: I'd be interesting in hearing about 1968 the impact of the end of censorship? What was your reaction to censorship?

IM: The Lord Chamberlain just seemed so silly. I was reading the other day that even he thought it was silly. It was inevitable that it was going to fall away, one didn't feel that one had to fight this huge camp of people. Perhaps one feels a bit more strongly now. It was going to go. It was just so ridiculous, it was beyond satire. At the same time now, writers, perhaps not in the long run, I don't know what Edward [Bond] would say about this, writers suffered. They did. They suffered in terms of their patronage. Not just at the hands of the Lord Chamberlain but also by those that felt the Lord Chamberlain, although idiotically expressed, had a case. I know with Bond's *Saved* became... well, it's a wonderful play...International recognition pushed it forward, but it also got in his way. I think it upset Edward too, because he was being labelled as a terrible little murderer, not someone who had an argument that he wanted forcefully to present. [...]

EJ: What was your reaction to *Behzti*?

IM: As someone who's joined the theatre, I have complete sympathy with the man who had to take that decision; the outrage is that he had to. Because the police said they couldn't protect the audience, not just for that play, but for *The Snowman*, for kids and so on. That's the outrage. Why not? What's so difficult about it? What are the police for if it's not to keep the peace? Cordon off an area, talk to the people who want to

protest, say 'You're allowed to protest, but if it gets out of hand and anyone throws anything, that's the van, you'll be in it'. There are ways of dealing with this and so it's thrown back to him. 'It's going to be your responsibility if people are harmed. So I was entirely sympathetic to his decision, whilst feeling it was outrageous that he had to make it. Particularly as the theatre is doing everything that the government, the Arts Council, would wish it to do, and doing it honestly, for doing it when it gets a little out of hand. I think that's worrying. Jerry Springer, the television thing, well that's just daft, it's just a lot of idiots emailing. That's what it is and we know that. Christian Rights, fundamentalists, everything else, I'm sure we'll contain that. A sense of humour, not least Jerry Springers, I think, will protect us from any harm there. [laughs]

EJ: Thank you.