

The band describe their own 'origins', as individual band members and as a collective, at length on their website (*Teacheros Orchestra* n.d.). They frame their musical inheritance as a journey from rural, pre-industrial origins to cosmopolitan modernity. This provides an example of a 'national journey' in music, described by Philip Bohlman:

National music [...] follows a journey that implicitly charts the landscape of the nation, beginning in the remotest core and reaching the end of the journey in the national metropolis. [...] When folk music follows the national journey, it undergoes a transition from representing the immanent quintessence of the nation to representing the nation itself. [...] In the course of its travels from the land to the nation, folk music becomes suddenly modern, and it is that transformation that makes it profoundly national. (Bohlman, 2011, 62–63)

This entry into modernity reterritorialises the global 'mainstream' culture which Somerville previously saw as in opposition to his own musical practice as a young traditional musician. The mechanical and stylistic innovations which have established the profoundly commercial, globalised and hybridised genre of folk fusion have reinforced and renewed our awareness of the contemporaneity of tradition and national culture. The genre manifests a Janus-faced nationalism which fuses the cultural resources of the national past with the contemporary, mechanical and mediated resources available to traditional performers in the age of electronic media.

Notes

- 1 Lyrics performed in Gaelic are given here in a translation taken from sleeve notes: see Rumrig (1987).
- 2 For an account of the contested authorship of this song's lyrics see McCue (1996), 46–48.

9 'It happens in ballads' Scotland, utopia and traditional song in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*

Stephe Harrop

In the National Theatre of Scotland's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011), the eponymous heroine is a collector of ballads, who views her role as the loving preservation of traditional artworks. However, Prudencia's perspective is challenged both by the jibes of academic rival Colin, who labels her scholarship 'sweet' – 'With a sort of old fashioned ethnographic notion of 'collecting'/ Or 'protecting'/Ballads' (Greig, 2011, 15) – and by her late-night encounter with the sinister Nick, whose own passion for collecting forces Prudencia to revise her sense of the ballad's nature, and potential functions. The ballad has long been a site of contention for debates about Scotland's musical traditions and national heritage, and David Pattie, in the 2016 article 'Dissolving into Scotland: National Identity in *Dunsinane* and *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*', argues that David Greig's play might be read as an index 'to the current state of Scottish identity', with the drama's characters (despite their apparently clear-cut, oppositional positions regarding the traditional ballad and its uses) becoming entangled in 'unending complexities' of narrative, location, and selfhood (Pattie, 2016, 30). The theatrical world of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* is one in which received notions of tradition and authenticity are relentlessly contested and subverted, and in which apparently stable identities can be radically re-imagined. Becoming participants in the drama's ballad-fuelled dramaturgy, both Prudencia and Colin – and even the Devil himself – are changed, as 'all the main characters swing from order to misrule but at different times, in different versions, and in different directions' (2016, 29).¹ In Greig's drama, the ballad's protean form proves to be both infectious, and transformative.

This chapter argues that this process is not necessarily limited to the play's characters, highlighting the ways in which the ballad, in the course of the drama, becomes a catalyst for live, collective vocalisation. It contends that via processes of 'musicking' and 'presencing' the show's audience is also offered its own experience of ballad performance. Taking David Greig's evocation of an imaginatively transformative 'rough theatre' as stimulus, and informed by a new focus within ballad studies on the ways in which performers and audiences produce meaning together, the chapter then reflects upon the value of the traditional ballad for politically engaged theatre more broadly, utilising Jill Dolan's descriptions

of a 'utopian performative' to consider how and why contemporary theatre artists might choose to borrow from of the sociable, participatory dynamics of the ceilidh. It concludes with the proposition that Greig's playful exploration of the ballad not only offers a stomping evening's entertainment, but can also be located within a wider project of promoting a lively, popular and multi-vocal debate concerning Scottish identity and destiny.

David Greig describes *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* as a play which 'is self-consciously in dialogue with the ballad form' (Wallace, 2013, 177).² Prudencia may regard the ballads she studies as heritage artworks to be collected, preserved and cherished, but her pieties are dismissed as 'middle class and reactionary' by Colin, who prefers to pursue 'working-class performativity', which:

Isn't plainsong or ballad, it's all celebrity
It's *X Factor*, it's flash mobs – it's being on YouTube – oh
It's less Tam Lin and more like Su Bo.
(Greig, 2011, 9)

When the two scholars are trapped in Kelso by heavy snowfall, this feud becomes central to the play's narrative and dramaturgy. As Prudencia treks alone through the midwinter midnight, she wanders from the world of the known into a realm of superstition and deviry, in which the haunting strains of 'Blackwaterside' indicate a shift into the dangerous territory of the ballad-become-real. Previously, Prudencia's musings on the snowy landscapes of the Borders have highlighted her sense of the ballad-as-Other, separate from her own contemporary experience.

It was as if history had gone into reverse and the past returned like a tide over a beach wiping out our footprints so that all the mess and ugliness of modern life was smoothed away and the world was once more full of old pure things like sledges and rosy cheeks and a genuine need for warming soups.

Thought Prudencia Hart.
Tides and blankness
As she drove south through a great bleezing blinding blowing blizzard
South into the Borders

This is exactly the sort of snow that if it were in a border ballad would poetically presage some kind of doom for an innocent heroine or an encounter on the moor with a sprite or villain or the losing of the heroine's selfhood in the great white emptiness of the night

She thought.
But this is not a ballad
She thought.
And so this is just snow.
(2011, 5–6)

Practical Prudencia, proud of having fitted snow chains to her car and of carrying a head-torch in her handbag, perceives the numinous landscapes of the ballads she studies to be sealed off, both by their past-ness and by their fantastical tropes, from the modern world, although this passage's uneasy balance between prose and verse, and the ironical lit of that repeated 'she thought', might begin to hint at some of the limitations of this point of view. Certainly by the time that Nick, the sinister proprietor of an unusual Kelso B&B, emerges out of the darkness (by this stage the performance-space is lit only by atmospheric candle-light, and the beams of that head-torch) we are firmly in the world of the supernatural ballad. For Nick's trade, as Prudencia realises just too late, is the entrapment of souls.

Finding herself imprisoned by her devilish companion, whose passion for 'collecting' ironically echoes her own academic pursuits, our heroine is forced to radically revise her sense of the ballad's nature and potentialities. Determined to escape Nick's clutches, and inspired by a quotation from her own thesis which argues that 'the topography of Hell is also the topography of unrequited love' (2011, 65), Prudencia begins to explore previously overlooked aspects of the traditional ballad, in so doing reversing some of her earlier assumptions. Prudencia's escape plan depends upon her realisation that the ballad form, with its rhythmic imperative and rich stock of romantic, fantastical tropes, offers a potentially liberating alternative to the prosaic tedium of their shared imprisonment. 'What would happen if we talked in rhyme?' (2011, 65) she asks:

If you surrender your thought to metre
You surrender yourself to the poem's beat, or
Rhyme or formula or word or sound.
The author is lost and creation found,
The poem finds itself – its own *autonomia* –
Where are you going with this Prudencia?
– What happens if we let go of prose?
We can't –
– Why not? If we adopt a more poetic form, who knows
What might happen?
(2011, 65–66)³

The ballad, Prudencia now insists, represents a space where things can change, and where formerly rigid roles and relationships can be re-negotiated. Seducing Nick first into rhyme, then into intimacy, and finally into sleep, Prudencia is at last able to break free from her infernal captivity.

Nick pursues his quarry back into the mundane world, the chase provoking a dramatic denouement which is introduced to the audience under the knowing title 'the Ballad of Co Lin' (2011, 71), Greig's joke punning on the name of the traditional ballad 'Tam Lin'. This ballad (first collected in 1769, though referred to two centuries earlier in *The Complaynt of Scotland*) tells the tale of a kidnapped mortal knight, rescued from a hellish fate by the constancy of his lover, who clings to him as he undergoes a series of magical metamorphoses. In *The Strange Undoing*

of *Prudencia Hart*, this traditional ballad tale is itself metamorphosed, as Nick and Colin (drunkenly emerging from a karaoke session) struggle for possession of Prudencia in a snowy Asda car park.

However, it is not only the play's protagonists who are lured into re-enacting a traditional ballad narrative. As the cast helpfully inform their assembled watchers (who have, in the course of the show, graduated from ripping up and throwing paper-napkin snowflakes to being co-opted into playing minor roles) this is a piece of ballad style storytelling which explicitly calls for the active participation of its audience (2011, 71). This is a significant moment for a play which has, throughout, operated upon the assumption that its audience does not belong to a living tradition of popular balladry and folk song.⁴ Earlier in the play, Greig has been careful to introduce spectators to the style and content of a folk session (2011, 19), and none of the traditional songs which have been performed so far in the course of the play ('The Twa Corbies',⁵ 'Blackwaterside') have called for any degree of audience participation.⁶ But the 'Ballad of Co Lin' is different. Now the play's audience, like the play's protagonists, are about to get personally involved.

Of course, the refrain which Greig's audience are coaxed or coerced into singing is not a ballad in quite the traditional sense. Fittingly for the scholar who has infuriated Prudencia by getting 'actual grants/For the recording and analysis of football chants' (2011, 7), and whose conference paper is entitled 'The Pastoral Tradition as Expressed in Modern Terrace Culture, or "Sheep Shagging Bastards"' (2011, 64), Colin's mock-heroic entry into the fray is accompanied by a very contemporary instance of popular song, which is 'not exactly a ballad it's mair a/Football chant to the tune of "Guantanamera"' (2011, 71). Still, the incongruous modernity of this chant does not stop it from functioning in some of the same ways as the refrain of a traditional ballad, using collective vocalisation to punctuate and structure an emerging narrative, allowing the co-present audience of a song to become (at least in part) its collective co-creators.

Now warmed up (and, in the performances I witnessed, possibly encouraged by the provision of free drams of whisky)⁷ the audience need little invitation to throw themselves into the vocal landscape of Colin's combat with the devil, gleefully joining in the chanting that follows each successive phase of the enchantment, yelling out: 'But Colin held on' (2011, 76–77). Although many of the increasingly vocal crowd may not know it, this is a close structural echo of the traditional 'Tam Lin', where Tam's injunction to 'haud me fast, let me not pass' (or variations upon this theme) is repeated as the penultimate line of several stanzas (Scott, 1902: vol. 2; 399–400). The triumphal bawling of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* is arguably not a million miles away from the kind of collective vocalisation invited by this repetitive phrasing.⁸ And so as Prudencia and Colin collapse happily into the snow, the audience too find themselves in a changed relationship with the ballad tale being narrated among them, and with one another. The structures and subject-matter of a traditional ballad, no longer sealed in romantic archaism, have become the basis for a shared moment of immediate, rough and boisterous theatrical pleasure.

There is more going on here than Greig and his collaborators creating a self-consciously clever mash-up of ancient and modern balladry. In his 2007 essay 'rough theatre',⁹ Greig envisions a theatrical event which might be:

Poetic rather than prosaic.

Irrational and intuitive.

It would be childish and infantile.

It would be transcendent and it would be about transcendence.

It would take place in rough places.

It would take over spaces and demand that they become theatres.

It would be cheap.

It would be written fast, rehearsed fast and performed fast.

It would contain music and song.

It would be enchanting

(2007, 220)

In the same essay, Greig discusses his long-held desire to 'get away from theatre that proposed dialectical solutions in the old left-wing tradition and offer a theatre that tore at the fabric of reality and opened up the multiple possibilities of the imagination' (2007, 212). Distancing himself from the schematic, singular answers of didactic political theatre, the playwright instead advocates a mode of performance which might be both populist in style, and utopian in its imaginative scope. Above all, Greig's essay outlines an aspiration to create performances which would acknowledge and take advantage of the fact that 'theatre is all about people coming together in a local physical space – one of the few remaining public spaces – and experiencing something together' (2007, 219). According to this argument, the potential radicalism of theatrical performance lies in its capacity to create temporary communities of artists and audiences, animated by a shared desire to encounter the transformative effects of collective imagining.

This emphasis upon the collective experience of performance aligns Greig with some important developments in the study of traditional ballads. Recent ballad scholarship has increasingly stressed the multimedia creation and transmission of traditional songs (Sorensen, 2007; Fumerton et al., 2010). In *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts* David Atkinson emphasises the 'collaborative, social nature of text-making' within the ballad tradition, a process which (for any given song) may have included 'editors, printers, readers, actors, even censors' (2014, 21) as well as more classically 'oral' tradition bearers. Research in the field has also shifted from the analysis of ballad-texts as heritage artefacts (as exemplified by the perspectives of the pre-undone Prudencia) towards an understanding of the ballad as a complex nexus of text and music and collective imagining, re-activated in the unique context of each one-off performance, where a traditional song's meanings and effects are negotiated between co-present performers and audiences. Such scholarship presents a stimulating perspective from which to view *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, and the discussion which follows borrows from the musicological concepts of 'musicking' and 'presencing' in order

to reflect upon the experience of the play's vocalising audience in the later stages of the drama.¹⁰

In *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (1998), Christopher Small argues for the conceptual importance of the present participle, or gerund, of the verb 'to music' in discussing the experience of musical performance. He proposes that the act of 'musicking' is multiform, encompassing actions including:

to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing; by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing [original italics].

He adds:

We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance. (1998, 9)

This wide-ranging conceptualisation of the nature of music-making re-focuses attention away from music as a product, towards an understanding of 'musicking' as collaborative, contingent and (crucially) processual. Small's arguments emphasise the contexts and relationships through which music is created and shared, stressing that: 'Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something people do' (1998, 2). Understanding a concert, gig or ceilidh as a process of 'musicking' also highlights the degree to which a performance is shaped by a range of participants. As Small observes, 'musicking' 'is an activity in which all those present are involved and for whose nature and quality, success or failure, everyone present bears some responsibility'. 'Whatever it is we are doing', he argues, 'we are all doing it together' (1998, 10). In terms of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, Small's insights help to identify the type of activity which is taking place when the play's audience gets charmed or coaxed into bawling out the refrain of the show's re-visited 'Tam Lin'. The resulting cacophony may not be singing in any conventional sense, but this rowdy, multi-vocal reactivation of a ballad structure is definitely a form of 'musicking', for the satisfactorily joyous conclusion of which each member of the participating audience shares responsibility.

Such collaborative, processual re-negotiations of traditional tunes and lyrics are central to ballad performance. In his 2009 study of the changing contexts of traditional ballads, James Porter proposes that the interaction of singer and audience is critical to the creation of meaning in performance:

the 'presence' of ballads is only meaningful when the singer or performer and audience are inter-responsive in a specific physical space that they share. We might even coin the neologism 'presencing' to express this active relationship. (2009, 7)

For Porter, the term 'presencing' represents the 'complete imaginative encounter' between song, singer or musician, and co-present audience (2009, 9), articulated in opposition to traditions of ballad scholarship which had focused principally upon the printed words of a song, in isolation from its music, performance context(s), and the influence of active listeners. Further, he argues that the impact of a ballad's 'presencing' might be dramatic, with both performers and listeners experiencing 'a departure from everyday norms into the unknown, unexpected, or transcendental territory of the imagination' effecting (following a return to normality) a 'community of feeling' between those who have shared in this process (2009, 189).

This idea shares some significant qualities with the kinds of 'rough theatre' envisaged by Greig in his 2007 essay, which celebrates theatre's ability to disrupt rationality, advocating the creation of theatrical work in which 'the fabric of "reality" will tear and we can experience transcendence' (2007, 220).¹¹ In relation to Greig's dramaturgy in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, ideas of 'presencing' and 'musicking' highlight the ways in which the drama's performers and spectators work collaboratively in order to generate a transformative, imaginative experience, potentially capable of stimulating in participants a new sense of community belonging, even once the immediate theatrical moment has passed. As Mairi McFadyen, in her chapter 'Together in *Sang*: The Embodied 'Ballad Experience' as Singularly Plural', which develops Porter's ideas of 'presence' in phenomenological terms, writes:

the experience of folk song, both in production and reception, induces a sense of connectedness through the embodied experiencing of self and others as co-participants in a live, enacted and unfolding event. (2013, 161)

It might be fitting to compare the aftermath of Greig's 'Ballad of Co Lin', as Prudencia and Colin wake, dishevelled and befuddled, amid the snow of the car park. Neither quite remembers what happened last night (during the audience's collective voicing of the drama's new 'Tam Lin'), but both fervently agree that it was both embarrassing and, perhaps, tremendous (2011, 78–81). After the pair's unguarded re-performance of a ballad narrative, this is a moment in which, as they tentatively realise, new identities and relationships might have become possible.

These discussions of 'musicking', 'presencing' and 'rough theatre' all share a utopian quality; a sense that live performance might prove to be transformative in ways which potentially extend beyond the immediate moment of shared imaginative play. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* Jill Dolan explicitly argues that 'live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world' (2005, 2). She develops the notion of 'utopian performatives':

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone

slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.

(2005, 5)

Such 'utopian performatives', Dolan argues, can have the effect of heightening audience members' responsiveness not only to the narratives, images and characters appearing onstage, but also to one another. Utopian theatre, she proposes, 'offers a way to practice imagining new forms of social relationships', constructing performance situations in which audiences are invited to act in ways which might model 'civic engagement in participatory democracy' (2005, 61). According to Dolan's argument, utopian theatre provides a rehearsal space for real life, where performers and audiences can safely experiment with unfamiliar, unexpected ways of engaging with each other. This kind of utopian performance does not propose clear-cut solutions to particular social ills, or provide dogmatic, party-political programmes for making the world a better place. Rather, it opens a pleasurable, playful space within which new kinds of sociability and communication are revealed to be possible.¹² And, as in Greig's 'rough theatre', the 'something' experienced by each co-present audience depends upon the specific group gathered together in each unique space and place; an experience characterised by 'contingency', and (in consequence) offering a heightened awareness of the 'changeability of things' (Greig, 2007, 219).

The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart is not a directly political drama, although it is perhaps (in Dolan's terms) a utopian one. The play was conceived and created at a time when the question of Scottish independence was beginning to be debated with renewed vigour and a new sense of possibility, with the Scottish National Party presenting a draft referendum bill for public consultation in 2010, and gaining a majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament in 2011. Some scholars have proposed strong correlations between practices of ballad collection and historical relations between Scotland and England. For example, Valentina Bold, in her chapter 'Border Raids and Spoilt Songs: Collection as Colonization', explicitly links the practice of collecting traditional songs with histories of territorial annexation:

The colonization begins with the collector/colonizer's desire to conquer the territory, or intellectual property, of the native/performer who is, implicitly, incapable of managing it.

(2003, 355)

Bold was involved in the development of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* as one of a group of scholars who collaborated with the play's production team in the work's early stages, and elements of the role of Prudencia may even have been modelled upon her; Greig thanks the scholar in his Author's Note to the play for having 'lent us the sparkle in her eyes' (2011: vi). However, Bold's direct alignment of ballad collecting with colonisation is not reproduced in Greig's play. The drama does show off its writer's awareness of ongoing scholarly debates about the

historical appropriation of ballad-texts, not least in a critical nod to Walter Scott's project of shaping a civil, nostalgic, picturesque, and Act-of-Union-friendly Scottish identity founded upon his antiquarian gathering (and occasional authorship) of traditional songs from the Borders.¹³ Colin characteristically infuriates Prudencia with his argument that Scott's plan was:

To respond to the eighteenth-century popularity of *Ossian*

By collecting Scots poems, laments and sagas

To create a 'Scottish' identity 'every bit as artificial as Lady Gaga's.

(2011, 12)

But Greig's own play eschews any such nation-building agenda. Indeed, a drama whose ballad hero, lurching sozzled from karaoke-singing to midnight derring-do clad in 'proud Calvin Kleins', his insides warmed by a mixture of 'Jack Daniels and Diet Coke', his (dubious) martial virtues causing him to be likened to 'Samuel L. Jackson', 'Jackie Chan' and 'a beer-bellied ninja' (2011, 74), clearly locates us within a contemporary Scotland which is both globalised, and culturally diverse. Instead of repeating the clichés of Scott-ish national sentiment, Greig develops a more playful and fluid sense of the utopian potential of the traditional ballad in contemporary performance.

In 'Dissolving into Scotland', Pattie argues that *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, in common with many of Greig's earlier works, develops a sophisticated exploration of a complicated and unstable range of Scottish identities, within a country which is always 'shifting into a new, as yet unknown shape' (2016, 22). Pattie's analysis highlights how:

What seems like a clear binary structure at the play's beginning has more or less disintegrated by the end of the performance; as this happens, the location of the narrative expands and the characters find themselves inhabiting somewhere which is infinitely extended and infinitely complex.

(2016, 28)

For Pattie, the flexibility of the ballad is analogous to the many complex and changing notions of 'Scotland' which abound in Greig's works. As Dan Rebelato comments in his Introduction to Greig's *Plays 1*, 'David sees little merit in simplistic and narrow definitions of Scottish identity because it's the very slipperiness of Scottishness that is its prime virtue' (2002: xi). The traditional ballad is thus a fitting symbol for the radically unfixed nature of 'Scotland' in Greig's plays, which is frequently an 'absence given a shape and a location by the people who engage with it' (Pattie, 2013, 210). As David Atkinson states in *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts*, 'the ballad cannot be located in a single place' due to its 'constant and multiple production' (2014, 19; 23). It is always as much 'imaginary conjecture' as fixed text or stable cultural artefact (2014, 22).

And the ballad tradition evoked by Greig's dramaturgy in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* is not only protean – it is also participatory. As McFadyen

writes, the 'inherent indeterminacy' of the form invites 'both ballad singer and audience to actively participate [...] to re-create and become co-creators themselves' (2012, 13). In performances of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* the shape-shifting, popular orality of the ballad in live, collective performance opens a space for a raucous, inclusive and convivial exchange with and between members of the show's audience. Considered in the political context of 2011, the sociable dynamics of the traditional ceilidh, transposed into theatrical performance, might consequently be interpreted as exemplifying the kind of engaged, inclusive and potentially transformative citizenship that Greig has advocated for Scotland at large, both before and after the 2014 independence referendum. In a 2013 article Greig wrote:

In the context of independence the parameters of politics suddenly turn out to be more malleable than we thought [...] nothing is a given any more, not even the idea of Scotland itself. Should Shetland be part of Scotland? Should Newcastle? This new malleability is married to a practicality that gives even ordinary political discourse an extra piquancy. Change is possible. Put simply, the Independence debate allows us to explore every aspect of our national life and ask ourselves the question – 'does it have to be like this?' (Greig, 2013)

The referendum, he argued, would be 'a one-off chance for everyone to question assumptions and imagine a different future', in a local and global conversation extending far beyond the binary 'yes/no' offered on the ballot's papers (Greig, 2013).¹⁴ Although Greig was upfront about his own allegiances throughout the campaigns, his primary argument here is that a lively, multi-vocal debate concerning Scottish identity and destiny has the potential to play a positive role in re-defining and re-energising Scottish culture and identity, regardless of the ultimate outcome of the September 2014 vote. Considered in this context, the 'rough theatre' practices of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, the drama's knockabout deconstruction of the ballad's heritage status, and its endorsement of joyous, raucous, multivocal engagement with the traditional arts, can be interpreted as belonging to a parallel theatrical project. The play does not require that its vocalising audiences adopt any particular political position in relation to contemporary questions surrounding Scottish identity. As McFadyen points out, ballad experience 'is paradoxically both highly individual and simultaneously always a shared experience' (2013c, 159). Rather, the show's inclusive dramaturgy, which (at the play's dramatic crux) depends upon its audience being willing to risk the raising of their own voices in a potentially embarrassing (and potentially tremendous) re-activation of a traditional ballad narrative, can be understood as modelling the notion that Scotland itself, in a moment of transformative utopianism, might be radically re-shaped by the many voices raised within it.

Deploying traditional music with political intent is nothing new in Scottish theatre. As Trish Reid observes, the incorporation of 'popular modes', including 'music and song', has been a crucial constituent of an often radical tradition of

'folk populism' (2013, 47, 13).¹⁵ In 1973 *The Cheviot, The Stag and The Black, Black Oil* (7:84 Scotland), described as 'a ceilidh play',¹⁶ famously fused history, economics and folk-scored agitprop to critique capitalist exploitation of Scotland's natural resources. More recently, the popular success of *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* has made it the most prominent among a crop of works testifying to a revival of interest in traditional song among theatre-makers both in Scotland and England. Increasingly urgent issues of history, identity and nationhood have inspired works including *The Bloody Great Border Ballad Project* (Northern Stage at St. Stephen's, 2013) and *Rantim* (National Theatre of Scotland, 2013–2014), informed by a sense that Scotland and England's traditional songs might provide a valuable forum for re-visiting, revising and contesting individual and collective identities within a rapidly changing UK. Common to these projects is an emphasis on popular practices of collective singing, an awareness of the provisionality and potential flexibility of inherited narratives, and a desire to promote audiences' sense of their own vocal and imaginative agency.

In *Theatre & Scotland*, Trish Reid observes that 'The popular continues to be a vital medium through which the Scottish nation performs itself to itself'. She further asserts that *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* represents a 'celebratory, or even ecstatic' instance of the ways in which theatre drawing on popular performance traditions can promote public engagement with contentious issues of heritage, identity and nation (2013, 48–49). A similar set of aspirations can be seen informing *The Great Yes, No, Don't Know, Five Minute Theatre Show* which David Greig co-curated for the National Theatre of Scotland in the summer of 2014. Introducing the project, the playwright described it as:

an extraordinary celebration of democratic and creative spirit in Scotland. Over one tremendous day in June we'll bring together hundreds of plays, sketches, songs, polemics and poems made by groups around the country [...] At this key moment in the nation's history it's a way for the Scotland to speak to itself – not in formal political tones – but in a relaxed, rambunctious, celebratory and personal way; and crucially, it's a chance for everyone to contribute, not just a political or artistic elite.

(National Theatre of Scotland, 2014)

This advocacy of a relaxed, rambunctious and celebratory approach to performance-making, and to national discourses, represents the point of intersection between *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* and many of Greig's more explicitly political projects of recent years.¹⁷ It is in the play's convivial, ballad-inspired dramaturgy that the drama most eloquently reveals its political affinities.

Disputing with a gloomy, prose-bound devil, Greig's Prudencia is adamant that embracing the poetic form of traditional balladry might prove liberating in unexpected ways. To Nick's assertion that 'We're in Hell./Love is impossible.' Prudencia replies 'It happens in ballads' (2011, 65), setting the stage for an uproarious shift into a 'utopian performative' mode in the play's second half. Seducing the audience into their own process of 'musicking' via the 'Ballad of Co Lin', and

'presencing' the old song through this tale's raucous, close-up comic immediacy,¹⁸ *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* mischievously positions its audience as the co-creators of an imaginative world in which the boundaries between the mundane and the fantastic, what is and what might be, are revealed to be more permeable than we might have assumed.

In 'Radical Democratic Theatre', Tony Fisher argues that democratic theatre 'cannot "liberate" anyone but it can destabilise the matrices of a given political distribution', and thereby make possible 'forms of reciprocal action and empathetic identification on which new forms of sociability might be based' (2011, 15). Greig makes a similar point in the essay 'rough theatre', as he argues: 'Theatre cannot change the world, but it can allow us a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves' (2007, 220). In *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, it is the play's multiple re-makings of collective ballad singing which facilitate this temporary, collective space of utopian potential. The drama's sociable celebration of popular vocality, and the collective re-visioning of old songs and stories, holds up a mirror to the idealism and ebullience of the pre-referendum years, and to a utopian sense that nations as well as songs might be re-imagined through collaborative, creative interactions between the diverse voices raised within them. In his essay 'Music and Identity' (1996) Simon Frith famously argued that it is 'through cultural activity' that people come to know themselves as members of communities (2007, 296). As this chapter has proposed, in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* audiences are invited to rediscover the participatory performance traditions associated with the borders ballad as part of an ongoing, popular, inclusive (and potentially radical) discourse about the communities and nations we inhabit, and the utopian spaces we might collectively imagine.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to David Pattie and Marilena Zaroulia for their support and advice in developing this chapter.
- 2 For details of the genesis of the drama see Wils Wilson in Wallace (2013: 227–30).
- 3 This scene is echoed in Greig's own account of writing the play's text: 'because I had to write in rhyme I couldn't control where it went' (Wallace, 2013: 175).
- 4 On the often unspoken rules concerning participation in English folk singing sessions see further Hield (2013).
- 5 The ballad 'The Twa Corbies', which opens *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, is a fitting choice for a play which strategically de-stabilises our sense of traditional song's heritage status, since modern ballad scholars have posited Walter Scott's possible authorship (or at least invasive 'editing') of this supposedly 'traditional' song. Sorensen (2007: 23–24).
- 6 *The Cheviot, The Black, and The Black, Black Oil* similarly differentiates between English-language folk and protest songs, with which audiences are invited to sing along, and Gaelic lyrics sung by an unaccompanied female voice which, like Annie Grace's rendition of 'Blackwaterside' in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, are more often framed as set-piece solos.
- 7 My own encounters with *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* took place at the London Welsh Centre, and the CLF Café (Peckham) during the summer of 2013.
- 8 Compare, for example, McFadyen's account of singing the ballad 'Young Emsie' (2013c: 160). See also Hield (2013: 114).

9 Its title recalling that of Peter Brook's seminal 1968 essay, describing: 'the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back: theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes' (1990: 73).

10 For a discussion of ways in which ballad 'experience' might be defined see McFadyen (2013: 155–157).

11 An image echoed in Greig (2011: 69).

12 Compare Zaroulia's account of the utopian pleasures of the Eurovision Song Contest (2013: 45–6).

13 See further Oliver (2005: 19–68), Dentith (2006: 20–47) and Stafford (2007). Bold's (2003) language choices echo Scott's own descriptions of his youthful practice of riding 'raids' into Liddesdale in search of 'songs and tunes' during the 1790s (1902: vol. I, xi).

14 On Greig's recurring subversion of 'yes/no' narratives see Pattie (2016).

15 On the historical conditions which encouraged the persistence of popular and traditional forms within Scottish theatre, see Reid (2013: 31–43).

16 A phrase which appears on the front cover of McGrath (1974).

17 See, for example, Pattie (194–210) in Wallace (2013).

18 Porter notes that "'presence" does not necessarily imply solemnity: tongue-in-cheek parodic or bawdy or humorous songs, for instance, can also elicit "presence"'. (2009: 8).