

## Questioning Subjectivity in Contemporary Scottish Theatre: Nation, Identity and Difference in Chris Dolan's *Sabina!*

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To the mind of many researchers in the field, “nationality” constitutes one of today’s dominant modes of collective identity,<sup>1</sup> therefore exerting a paramount influence on both the perception and the construction of contemporary subjectivity. Viewed in the light of recent European developments, however, questions of national identity take on paradoxical connotations: while on the one hand heading towards unification, the European countries, and the smaller ones in particular feel that their national identity is under threat, and Scotland is no exception in this respect.

John McGrath, the founder of the glorious 7:84 theatre company and one of the most representative voices within Scottish culture, explains in these terms the increasing importance of nationalism in Scotland:

[...] the larger, more powerful nations are clearly going to dominate absolutely: Europe will take on the identity of Germany and France just as surely as European currency will take on the identity of the French and German currency. This multi-national identity, however it is constructed, will tend to create another language, a meta-language on top of local languages and cultures; a culture above, or maybe alongside, local ones. Just as entertainment values from the United States have tended to erode British entertainment culture, so this meta-culture will tend to erode the sense of identity and the specifics of local and national cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Rejecting the hegemonic model implicit in the American “melting pot”, McGrath voices the hope that “in European terms there will be two languages and two cultures”, that “there will be a common culture which is European culture [...] and existing alongside that will be national and local cultures”.<sup>3</sup> McGrath’s position resembles that of most Scottish writers and intellectuals who are intent on exploring the relationship between central and peripheral cultures. As a small nation with sharp linguistic, historical and cultural

particularities, Scotland could be seen to provide a sort of testing ground for a more progressive, dialectical construction of nationhood in the context of the completion of the European project.

This alone would account for the widespread concern, among exponents of today's cultural, literary and theatrical "Scottish Renaissance", with the investigation of the political, individual and personal positioning of the subject as it is determined by one's sense of belonging to a specific national paradigm. But one must also include a related phenomenon, namely the rise, among the Scottish intelligentsia over the last two decades, of a "post-colonial cultural consciousness",<sup>4</sup> parallel to the struggle to re-define Scotland's position within Great Britain and Europe by questioning the centre/margin paradigm imposed and maintained by England as a prop to its "imperial enterprise".<sup>5</sup> Unlike other post-colonial countries, Scotland has developed an awareness of its political marginalization and cultural denigration, and subsequently put forward independence claims, without concomitant economic and—until this year's successful Devolution bill—political autonomy. For this reason, it has become common to speak of a process of "cultural substitution"<sup>6</sup> whereby writers, intellectuals, artists have been called upon to fill the roles of politicians and local institutions. The drive towards a separate cultural identity peaked after the failure of the 1979 referendum to secure political independence: a growing sense that Scotland was appallingly impotent, that it would "continue to be castrated by the London Tories",<sup>7</sup> gave further impulse to the re-creation of "Scottishness".

In this context, it is no wonder that the theatre should have provided, especially from the 1970s onwards, an important field of political debate. Besides trying to vindicate independence from the English centre by finding a distinctive dramatic voice, playwrights have fully exploited the potential of this art-form based on role-playing in order to investigate the way identity of a national, cultural, linguistic, sexual kind is formed—or rather, performed. In the works of the Scottish new wave, the complexities of living and writing in a Scotland within Europe are a constant concern. Playwrights like David Greig, Chris Dolan, Rona Munro, Sue Glover, to name but a few, are bent on a quest for identity in the attempt to re-define Scottishness in the face of global changes. It is a recurring feature of their works that spatial metaphors of travel, exile, and mapping are employed to question national identities, and that this process of self-examination is often sparked off by an encounter with difference.

In David Greig's multilingual play *Airport* (1996), the individual stories of various characters intersect at an international airport, a place, in director Graham Eatough's words, "where identity is being taken away from you all the time",<sup>8</sup> and where the need to communicate reveals the failure of comforting national stereotypes such as Scottishness to provide a common ground for the sharing of experiences, memories, emotions with people coming from other parts of the world. *One Way Street* (1995) by the same writer revolves around the idea, taken from Walter Benjamin's *A Berlin Chronicle*, of drawing the map of

one's life, and stages "a stroll through the life of one man", a Scotsman named, in Baudelairean fashion, Flannery, who "has been employed to write a penny guide to the city called 'Ten Short Walks in the Former East'. As he writes and as he walks, he finds the geography of his own life seeping into and distorting the city of East Berlin around him".<sup>9</sup> Both *New Frontiers* (1993) by 7:84 and *Europe* (1993) by David Greig explore the changes and upheavals which have affected central and eastern Europe over the last few years and their dislocating effect on people. Migrancy and displacement also feature prominently in Rona Munro's play *The Maiden Stone* (1995), whose protagonist is a nineteenth-century strolling actress trekking the Scottish highlands, as well as in Sue Glover's *An Island in Largo* (1980), which deals with the life of the sailor Alexander Selkirk, alias Robinson Crusoe, portraying his youth, sea travels, and his sense of alienation after he returns to his native Scotland.

Writing about themselves from a position of marginality, Scottish dramatists tend to confront Otherness with a willingness to cross boundaries and a readiness to re-define their own frontiers. The apparent contradiction between the European/cosmopolitan orientation of contemporary Scottish writers and their recurrent concern with Scottishness, must therefore be explained in terms of the double-sided demand that "on the one hand you question personal, cultural and national identity, on the other hand you need to know where you start from".<sup>10</sup>

Chris Dolan's<sup>11</sup> *Sabina!*, Fringe First at the Edinburgh Festival in 1996, is a particularly significant instance of a work where issues of identity take the shape of an imaginary journey and an encounter with difference. The play sets out to show how an individual's sense of belonging to a national paradigm is the result of a continual process of fabulation and self-fashioning, and ends up revealing the fictional, performative nature of subjectivity itself.<sup>12</sup> Taking as his starting point a situation where the "national narrative" has turned into a straitjacket on the personality, Dolan reveals how the encounter with the exotic "Other" can open up new imaginative and existential possibilities.

*Sabina!* is set in Glasgow in 1989, just before the outset of Vaclav Havel's Velvet Revolution. When Sandra, who shares a flat with Tereza, realizes that Matthew, her former school pal and now a teacher, is irresistibly attracted to her friend's exotic and mysterious aura, she decides to fashion for herself a brand new "Czech" identity. Taking inspiration partly from Tereza's life, partly from Scottish cultural stereotypes about Czechs and Eastern Europeans in general, she turns herself into the glamorous Sabina Vasiliev. Matthew, who had been at school with Sandra, fails to recognize the one-time "little mousy girl" (62) and gets immediately caught in the trap. Sabina's success compels Tereza to face the fact that people not necessarily "prefer the truth" (39). Sandra's verbal wit and rope-balancing skills make the plot move at a relentless pace, but at the same time the sequel of comic situations progressively strikes a sadder note. Sandra pushes the game too far, making a painless retreat impossible, while Tereza, who at first acts as an accomplice but later turns into

an embittered accuser, determines to punish Sandra's lie and Matthew's facile credulity by revealing Sabina's "real" identity to her passionate lover.

In the course of the story, the protagonists are transformed by these mutual encounters. Sandra experiences the pain of no longer being able to identify with her former, and apparently "true", self: Sandra's clothes now feel too tight, whereas her new persona as Sabina, built on dreams and wishes, fits perfectly. In the eyes of Matthew and other Glaswegians, Sandra appeared totally convincing in her interpretation of the Czech *femme fatale*, so much so that the real dissident, Tereza, now looks more like a lifeless, faded replica of the fascinating "Slavonic Princess" (45): fiction, it turns out, becomes more real than reality if it conforms to our needs and fantasies. Matthew chooses to see "Sabina" and ignore "Sandra" in the woman he falls in love with simply because he desires a Sabina, not a Sandra. In a Glasgow suffering from the "unbearable Scottishness of being",<sup>13</sup> Sabina, and not Tereza, appears to be the "real" dissident, because she was modelled on cultural stereotypes, shared fantasies, escapism. Part of Sabina's appeal, for instance, springs from the fact that she is a precipitate of commonplace sexual fantasies about Eastern European women, as is also apparent from Matthew's behaviour: he is only too ready to believe Sabina when she reveals that she had to resort to prostitution in order to escape from Czechoslovakia, feeling actually more intrigued than sorry for this Mata Hari figure.<sup>14</sup> Revealing a strain of sexism in Matthew's apparent political correctness, Dolan also voices an ironic comment on the long-standing male hegemony of the Scottish intelligentsia, where women's presence and efforts have only recently begun to be acknowledged.

The appeal of the exotic is shown to work both ways: just like Matthew desires a Sabina, so Sandra indulges in sexual fantasies about Tom's, Tereza's mysterious fiancé who is allegedly under arrest in Czechoslovakia, and she projects these fantasies onto Matthew who actually starts behaving accordingly. A one-time rebel during his school days, now torn between his dull life as a teacher and a rapacious ex-wife, Matthew re-discovers, through Sabina, his former idealism, passion, and capability to imagine a different future. Baffled by Tereza's revelation about Sabina's "true" identity, Matthew initially backs away from her, but ultimately realizes the absurdity of renouncing an exciting dream in the name of what promises to be a boring "real-life".

In a way, Dolan's play could be described as a remake of Cinderella's fairy-tale transformations, or, perhaps more appropriately, of the age-old Pygmalion myth.<sup>15</sup> The Pygmalion story, though, acquires here a strongly Pirandellian flavour, since Sandra does not depend on a (male) creator to mould her new persona. This enables Dolan to fully exploit the tragi-comic potential of the situation, exploring the pain of the presentation of self and exposing the fiction of identity.<sup>16</sup> In a Scottish context, moreover, the Sandra/Sabina dualism is easily relatable to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which has been interpreted as "a subconscious metaphor for Stevenson's Scotland",<sup>17</sup> and its political and

religious schizophrenia. Chris Dolan himself provides a political reading of the doppelgänger theme, when he argues that “in Scotland, the Jekyll and Hyde syndrome has got to do with not being allowed to rule our own nation, to be what the English think we are”.<sup>18</sup>

Already at the level of composition, Dolan’s play seems to feature an inbuilt instability of identities. According to the author, *Sabina!* was inspired by a real-life case of a “Czech guy called Jan who lived in the West End of Glasgow, and apparently had come over here after 1968 ... But when he was getting married, it turned out he was actually Bill Smith from the South Side, and just travelled over each weekend to assume this character he’d invented for himself”.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Dolan first re-wrote the episode as a short story in his collection *Poor Angels*, and only later did his “statue” come to life in the theatre through Glaswegian actress, Lorraine McGowan. This meant a further stage of displacement since, as the playwright himself reveals, seeing a character speaking onstage is “like learning a new language, a much more powerful language because it is in conjunction with other people’s languages. [...] Suddenly the things you have written come back to you through someone else”.<sup>20</sup>

Formally speaking, Dolan’s *pièce* questions commonplace notions of genre: the author borrows the traditional structure of the naturalistic well-made-play while adding farcical elements, and ultimately deconstructs the form through the destabilizing effect of the continual oscillation between different layers of impersonation, as well as by the adoption of the tragi-comic form which, as in Pirandello, Beckett, and Stoppard, implies a calling into question of the conventions of theatre itself.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of the statue coming to life, of artistic creation surpassing reality and rebelling against its creator, appears suited to Scottish literature where the original name for a poet is “makar”, a maker/creator of worlds. Both the Pygmalion myth and the Pirandellian make-believe game are an indication of the play’s self-reflexive nature. *Sabina!*, that is, could be interpreted as an exploration of theatricality, of its workings and possibilities, taking place at the same time as it is displayed on stage.

Dolan’s investigation of theatricality moreover takes a political turn, as he weighs the theatre’s possibility to act as a weapon of change – the mysterious transformative capacity that Antonin Artaud, following Saint Augustine, ascribed to the theatrical “plague”.<sup>22</sup>

The play’s more explicitly political theme deals with the Velvet Revolution and its meaning for West Europeans and the Scottish Left. From this point of view, the encounter with difference is employed by Dolan to prompt a reconsideration of Scotland’s own past and present political attitude(s), a necessary step at the particular historical moment he was writing, namely just prior to the Devolution bill.

According to the playwright, the Velvet Revolution “was very traumatic, especially for us on the Left”.<sup>23</sup> The fall of the communist system marked the

end of a shared dream and, at the same time, unmistakably exposed that dream's rootedness in lies and mystifications originating with the Eastern regimes but supported on the other side of the Iron Curtain, too. To many would-be rebels like Matthew, the socialist ideal was more important than its actual historical manifestation, it represented a dream that had to be defended even if this meant ignoring a reality of repression, torture, death and colluding with totalitarianism. With the fall of the Wall, though, other barriers have broken down: what was once regarded as the "exotic" has become part of everyday life, and this has implied the unavailability of Otherness—in this case, of Eastern Europe—to provide the comfort of a presumed ideal society to be held against the corruption of capitalism.

On the other hand, Matthew's solidarity with the socialist "dream" is exposed as a failure to act responsibly. He looks for difference in others because he did not have the strength to practise it himself. For many like Matthew, Eastern Europe acted as a surrogate: whereas countries like Czechoslovakia experienced Communism first hand, testing out the dream and paying the consequences of failure, the Western Left managed to leave the "dirty job" to others and to preserve the purity of "ideals".

The Czech events also provide Dolan with the opportunity to draw the complex political implications of the identity game on a more general level. To begin with, the play shows that the 1989 revolution was itself sparked off by a lie. The Martin Smid episode, related by the radio speaker as a recurrent leitmotiv throughout the Sabina story, provides Dolan with an amazing historical case of the fiction of identity. It was the deep indignation at the news of this student's arrest and presumed death in police custody that fuelled the rebellion during the last, decisive days of the Velvet Revolution. When the whole episode turned out to be a sensational bluff—Smid, who was not even present at the Wenceslas Square demonstration, heard about his own death at the radio a few days later—the protest had already developed into a revolution. In a way, then, it was the Communist regime itself that collaborated to cause its own overthrow: the idea of telling the truth after so many years of lies appeared so frightening that the government preferred not to deny Smid's death; the totalitarian system's manipulation of people's consciousness is shown to be liable to counter-play, so that it ends up beaten by the very fiction it has created. A wonderful interplay of reality and illusion, the Martin Smid episode shows that fantasies, illusions, dreams are dangerous because they can be conveniently used to cover lies, but at the same time they have an enormous impact on history, where they can bring about change and, perhaps, progress.

The considerable material investment inherent in national "dreams" takes on a particular significance for Scotland, a country where important political transformations are on the agenda, and it is not always easy to discern between autonomy and nationalism, ideals and mystifications. In *Sabina!*, the encounter between Sandra and the foreigner Tereza ultimately leads to the realization of the fictionality of our sense of history, to the recognition, that is,

“that the construction of the ‘other’ has been fundamental to the historical, cultural and moral reproduction of our ‘selves’, and our ‘particular’ sense of the world”.<sup>24</sup> Dolan’s play makes it clear that Tereza, the Other against whom the dominant identity is modelled, is also a “fake”, or a persona. She is so readily integrated within the Glaswegian community because, as the playwright says, “she is the right kind of stranger”<sup>25</sup>: because she, too, is the outcome of collective dreams and stereotypes about Czechoslovakia, “this rather small and very mysterious state, peopled by blond, intelligent, glamorous, well-educated women and men”.<sup>26</sup> Dolan playfully admits that he sometimes gets the impression that “Tereza herself is wholly made up, that she could be just another Sandra”,<sup>27</sup> since she is always presenting an extremely acceptable façade as a foreigner. The playwright’s choice of Tereza to represent Otherness could be seen as a deliberate provocation: the audience is tricked into easy acceptance of the glamorous dissident, thus displaying a gullibility with respect to Tereza’s “authenticity” that comes close to Matthew’s with Sabina, and ultimately forcing the recognition that we are usually only ready to accept difference, or as in this case the exotic, so long as it remains within the range of our culture and control.

Exploring the theatricality inherent in both politics and the national paradigm, and the performative nature of collective and individual identities, Dolan ends up by deconstructing the rounded, Cartesian notion of subjectivity – an epistemological challenge that also constitutes, as post-colonial literary theory and practice have shown, an eminently political gesture.<sup>28</sup> This forms the basis for the play’s attempt to re-define “Scottishness”, overcoming Scotland’s induced sense of cultural inferiority by showing the creative potential inherent in marginality. From this point of view, Dolan’s choice of Czechoslovakia is particularly apt to give insight into the relativity of the concept of political marginality. Over the past few years both Scotland and the Czech Republic, respectively on the western and eastern borders of Europe, have experienced a fast-paced process of change: the enfranchisement from the Russian sphere of influence and the move towards integration in the E.U. for Czechoslovakia, and the process leading to political devolution from England and to a more independent position within the E.U. for Scotland, have shifted the relative positions of these countries with respect to the “centre”. The Czech Republic is today difficult to locate within the paradigm that identifies “us” Westerners against difference, since this nation is definitely part of European culture, language and past history, even if it has been regarded for the past forty years as something “other” behind the Iron Curtain. It is not unlike Scotland, a nation that still forms part of Great Britain but is not exactly “British”, and therefore a country suffering from a lack, or a void, in its national identity.

The elusiveness of Scotland’s identity is confronted in *Sabina!* from a variety of angles. To begin with, the national paradigm is called into question through the juxtaposition and intersection of different verbal codes, each carrying specific local and social connotations. Language is exposed as a

cultural construction, a tool in the formation of a particular sense of place and belonging, or, in Iain Chambers's terms, "a habitat".<sup>29</sup> In *Sabina!* different idioms are displayed: Sandra's and Matthew's Glaswegian variety of English, including bits of Scots vernacular or patois, Tereza's acquired English (a mixture of archaic Elizabethan, over-formal English and occasional demotic Glaswegian) and Sabina's playfully exaggerated but also carefully devised mimicry of an Eastern European's accent and mode of expression.

To Sandra's mind, the language she speaks sounds so familiar and dull that it turns into a prison-house limiting and confining her personality:

SANDRA: Sometimes, I get the feeling that if I stood in the same place for too long, I'd fade right into the stone. Did you ever get that feeling? Like you'd become fixed, earthed in one spot forever.

TEREZA: I know the feeling. But not here.

SANDRA: Well don't hang around or you soon will. If I were you I'd high-tail it back to Prague as soon as you've had your revolution. Otherwise you'll be sucked into the Bank of Scotland's portico before you can say a friend for life. (14)<sup>30</sup>

For Tereza, instead, the acquisition of the English language is something new, thrilling and, at least apparently, empowering. This is true only to a certain extent, though, since Tereza's enthusiastic appropriation of British culture is ridiculed by Sandra when she is shown using over-formal anachronisms meaning very little but which the well-educated emigrée appears boastful about:

SANDRA: I've noticed that. You never wear shoes in the house. Why's that? Do they pinch you?

TEREZA: No.

SANDRA: Mine do. They're pure murder. See if you're ever looking for me, just follow the trail of blood. I take a size smaller than I should.

TEREZA: Why?

SANDRA: I take everything a size smaller. That way you stop yourself from getting fat.

TEREZA: That is very lack-brained.

SANDRA: Lack-brained?

TEREZA: Blunt-witted.

SANDRA: Who in the name of the wee society man taught you English? Willy Shakespeare?

TEREZA: Yes, used his texts, and other great tomes in our class. (6)<sup>31</sup>

This is not, however, intended to be a reproduction of the "more English than the English" stereotype about foreigners, but rather shows the operation of



the dominated/dominant paradigm: Tereza, nurtured on the “great masterpieces” of literature, is not only subject to cultural denigration like Sandra, but she also displays a far more naive trust in the values imposed by the dominant culture, since her hostility towards “Sabina” is imbued with an essentialist view of personality and a monolithic definition of “truth”.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the play, Tereza returns to Czechoslovakia almost unchanged. On the contrary Sandra, through her impersonation of Sabina, has experienced the displacement of the very notion of an “authentic” subjectivity, and she has learnt about the power of language to “inhabit, construct and *extend* realities”.<sup>33</sup> In this way, an apparent loss is turned into a gain.

As the “makar” of her own persona, Sandra enacts one of the typical strategies of post-colonial writing: re-placing language and re-naming both space and self.<sup>34</sup> Already at the beginning of the play, when Sandra (re)meets Matthew and pretends to be a foreigner, she gets Matthew’s name wrong on purpose, calling him Martin, Mark, Michael, Malcom ... In addition to her own re-christening, then, Sandra from the outstart begins to question Matthew’s established identity, too. This anticipates the love-making scene later in the play, where Sabina convinces Matthew of the power of naming by luring him into assuming the identity of “Tomàs”, her alleged ex-lover and comrade in arms, whose fictional nature is nevertheless soon apparent:

[Matthew and Sandra are playing “Jamesh” Bond and the sexy spy]

MATTHEW: [...] Now what about this interrogation? You going to blindfold me?

SANDRA: Good idea. We’ll do that later. I’ve got another idea. A game Tom×s and I used to play.

MATTHEW: Not Tom×s! I don’t want to hear about him right now.

SANDRA: No—you must understand. Tom×s is just a word I use. It means lover.

MATTHEW: It means some great Slavic guy keeping his bed warm for you in Prague or Berlin or wherever.

SANDRA: No. I made the name up.

MATTHEW: You mean there was no one in Berlin?

SANDRA: No. Yes. But his name wasn’t Tom×s. I call all my men Tom×s.

MATTHEW: Christ. There must be a Euroglut of Tomases!

SANDRA: Now you are my Tom×s.

[... Sandra persuades Matthew to do a strip-tease for her.]

SANDRA: Remember the stream I told you of? In my garden, in my little village in Bohemia?

MATTHEW: I’m not really dressed for travel.

*She lies out on the couch.*

SANDRA: I want you to be my stream. Run over me, like the sparkling water. Make your body into waves. Flow over me.  
MATTHEW: Can I do that? Yeh, I can do that.  
*He comes over to her, begins to wriggle down her.*  
SANDRA: Yes, I like that. It's as if I were home at last.  
MATTHEW: I am the Great River Tom×s!  
SANDRA: You see the magic of Tom×s? With a new name, you can be whoever you like. Who would you like to be? (43-44)

Dolan is also careful to show that for language to become really empowering, re-naming must work in tandem with displacing and relocating meaning. In *Sabina!*, the interrogation of the sense of location significantly takes the form of re-drawing a map. Invited by Matthew to teach his “Modern Studies” class, the ingenious Sabina manages to stir his pupils’ imagination by demonstrating that the “epicentre” of Europe lies in a dull, depressed Scottish working-class town – all she needs to do is choose the “four corners of Europe” that are most suited to the purpose:

MATTHEW: [...] Sabina – do that thing you did with the kids again.  
SANDRA: Not now, Matthew.  
MATTHEW: Give me your lipstick. I'll show her.  
SANDRA: Tereza doesn't want to see that.  
TEREZA: On the contrary – I'd be fascinated.  
TEREZA: Here. Have mine.  
*She gives him lipstick.*  
MATTHEW: Right. (*Goes to the mirror:*) Pretend this is a map of Europe, right? That's Russia up there. Now, if you draw a St. Andrew's cross<sup>35</sup> from...where?  
SANDRA: Franz Joseph Island.  
MATTHEW: Franz Joseph Island in the north east, here. To the Azores in the south west, here. Then from Greenland –  
SANDRA: Iceland.  
MATTHEW: Iceland, in the north west. To Crete in the south east... That's the four corners of Europe, right?  
TEREZA: Not necessarily.  
MATTHEW: Well they're as good as any other four corners. But using these, where do you think the centre of Europe lies? Eh?  
*He taps the middle of the window.*  
TEREZA: No idea.  
MATTHEW: Austria? Geneva, maybe. Bet you think it's Prague.  
TEREZA: Where is it then?  
MATTHEW: Two miles south east of Motherwell! (*to Sandra*)

That'd be around Craigneuk. Craigneuk's the very epicentre of Europe! Would you believe it? Craigneuk? [...] That kind of stuff really woke 5A up. She makes them feel important, like they matter. (28-30)

Sandra's four corner game shows the relative instability of the centre/margin paradigm, since the centre is defined in relation to the margin: shifting the spatial coordinates thus imports to re-locating the centre.

If geographic marginality is liable to questioning and re-appraisal, so is cultural denigration. As already suggested, *Sabina!* can be seen as an instance of Scottish theatre looking at itself and "mapping" its position now that the recently experienced "golden age" is likely to re-establish its relations with the London metropolitan/imperial centre.<sup>36</sup> Seen from the "Sabina" perspective, Scotland's marginal position can turn into an aesthetic and artistic advantage, a paradoxically privileged viewpoint that favours observation and a critical perception of culture and its dynamics. Living with the feeling that "real" life, capital events, History, always happen elsewhere, one gets the habit of seeing double, of perceiving things both from within and from without, from an aesthetic distance which is a fundamental component of artistic creation. In this respect, Scottish writers are in a position analogous to that of the Greek tragic chorus, whose members tended to be elderly people, or women, or, more in general, powerless members of a society that pushed them to the margins of "capital" events and thus made them into observers, recorders, tellers, commentators – artists. Sandra's mimetic capacity derives from her skill in gazing though the "character" Tereza, and this enables her to create, like Pygmalion, a statue of such perfection that it appears truer to life than the model itself.

Moreover, Sandra's awareness of the fragility of identity heightens her ability to impersonate different roles – which is after all what makes her into an accomplished artist. If Sandra draws her creative skills from the experience of marginality, then Dolan seems to be reminding Scotland of this often underestimated potential. After all it cannot be just by chance that such a prominent share of this century's most significant literary and cultural output has come from Ireland, Scotland, Wales – the incredibly lively "borderlands" of Great Britain.

With *Sabina!*, Scottishness, national identity, and subjectivity in general, are shown to be not an essence, but rather the effect of a performance, a behaviour that can be apprehended, reproduced, adopted, and adapted. Considering this basic premise for the play, it follows that *Sabina!* should easily lend itself to translation into another language and culture. Such, at least, was our conviction when Maggie Rose and I began working on an Italian version, notwithstanding Dolan's perplexity with regard to moving Sandra's ennui about her second-rate life to Milan. To Glaswegian eyes, "a fashion queen from Milan" (17), comes

very close to the perfect embodiment of glamour and exoticism,<sup>37</sup> and Milan to the most romantic place to live in Europe.<sup>38</sup> We easily managed to quell Chris Dolan's objection by explaining that for people like us, well-fed and rather Mediterranean *milanesi*, top models floating around in town during the fashion season seem closer to weird, long-limbed aliens from outer space than to normal human beings. But Chris was also worried that the play's deep rootedness in a Scottish and Glaswegian context would render a transfer to another setting problematic. Nevertheless, we determined to stick to Sandra's suggestion: shift the four corners of Europe a bit, and the game still works. After all, Italy has historically suffered—albeit in different ways—from the same sense of defeat and cultural inferiority that has afflicted Scotland. Throughout modern times, it has been prey to conquest by the newly-formed European powers. Exploited, parcelled, and paralyzed by a deeply-rooted fatalism, Italy has developed a self-denigratory attitude, a tendency to see itself as a second-rate country in comparison to more “proper” nations like France and Great Britain. This colonial sense of the “centre” being elsewhere has outlived the national unification process in the second half of the nineteenth century and still today exerts a considerable influence on the national narrative. It is a disillusionment that sometimes verges on masochism—see e.g. the huge amount of E.U. funds destined to our country which remain unused every year because nobody applies for them. We therefore felt that the parallel between Italy and Czechoslovakia, this other European colony *par excellence*,<sup>39</sup> would still work in translation to question and redefine centre/margin relations.

The need to respect *Sabina's* inbuilt geographical and linguistic sense of location also made us decide for a strongly target-culture orientated translation. We believed that for the text to work properly it was necessary to re-create for Italian audiences a situation that would appear familiar to the point of boredom, as this forms a necessary pre-requisite for the spectators' involvement in the comparison with difference and in the role playing dynamics. Sandra Hamilton from Glasgow thus became Sandra Guarini from Milan, where she has to fight day after day against her own unbearable “Milaneseness” of being. Her otherness as a phoney Czech in Milan was quite easy to translocate: women from the Eastern countries emanate the same aura of exotism/eroticism in the eyes of Italian males, and therefore Sandra Guarini could well exploit the same cultural stereotypes as her Glaswegian counterpart in order to gain credibility in Milan.

As far as Matthew (Matteo) and the exposure of communist idealism on the safe side of the curtain are concerned, Italy and Scotland are closer in this respect than one might assume. People who were on the Left in Italy have experienced in recent times the same feeling that things never change, no matter how hard people try, which Scots associate with the Thatcher era during the forty-year rule by the Democrazia Cristiana party. Since the Second world war, the Italian Communist Party was the strongest in Western Europe. Whole areas of the country, and especially the affluent “red” regions Emilia Romagna

and Tuscany, had a longstanding tradition of efficient left-wing local administration but until April 1997 their position was never given corresponding representation on a national scale. That a left-wing coalition has now come to power is in part a consequence of the fall of the Wall, which has rendered the “Communist peril” politically unusable as a deterrent against voting for the Left. Yet, in their endeavours to explain that if a socialist government had come to power in Italy nobody would have been dispossessed of property and sent to work on state farms, left-wing sympathizers were reluctant to denounce the totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe—in order to fight the D.C. regime at home, they ended up colluding with another regime abroad. Apparently, then, Matthew and Matteo are aligned in similar positions.

I say apparently since, at the time I am writing this article, the Italian *Sabina!* has yet to be produced. Although confident in Sandra’s ability to impersonate different national identities, Maggie Rose and I are eager to see our translation tested on stage: we hope this will happen very soon.

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### Notes

1. See Anthony Easthope, “The Question of National Culture: Thinking About Englishness”, in Marialuisa Bignami and Caroline Patey (eds.), *Moving the Borders, Papers from the Milan Symposium, Varenna - September 1994*, Milano: Unicopli, 1996, 349-362. Easthope mentions Anthony D. Smith’s more radical position which sees national identity as amounting to modernity’s most inclusive form of collective identity: “Of the collective identities in which human beings share today, national identity is perhaps the most fundamental and inclusive. [...] Other types of collective identity—class, gender, race, religion may overlap or combine with national identity but they rarely succeed in under-mining its hold, though they may influence its direction”. (Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, 1991, p. 143).
2. “From Cheviots to Silver Darlings: John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou”, in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds.), *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, 149-163: 154-155.
3. Ibid.
4. Tom Maguire, “When the Cutting Edge Cuts Both Ways: Contemporary Scottish Drama”, in *Modern Drama*, 38, 1995, 87-96: 88.
5. For the position of Irish, Welsh and Scottish literatures within post-colonial studies, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London & New York: Routledge, 1989. The authors indicate Max Dorinsville’s dominated-dominating paradigm as the most appropriate for societies which were “the first victims of English expansion” but whose “subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized people to accept their identity as post-colonial”. To the extent that Dorinsville’s model “forcefully stresses linguistic and cultural imposition” it also “enables an interpretation of British literary history as a process of hierarchical interchange in internal and external group relationships” (33).

6. Maguire, art. cit., 30.
7. "From Cheviots to Silver Darlings: John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou", cit., 159.
8. Quotation taken from a press conference held at Milan's British Council, 14 April 1997, during "Scotsfest", a festival of Scottish theatre, cinema, visual arts, music jointly organized by the British Council and the University of Milan.
9. From the introduction to the unpublished playscript by David Greig for *Suspect Culture* - Glasgow.
10. Chris Dolan interviewed by the present author, Milan, 17 April 1997.
11. With his multifarious interests and activities, Chris Dolan (b. Glasgow, 1958) is a well-known exponent of the Scottish Renaissance. Dolan writes for the theatre, cinema (*Franny Unparadized*, 1995 and *Poor Angels*, 1996) and television (Channel Four, BBC Scotland) but tends to define himself as a prose writer (among other acknowledgements, he was awarded the prestigious Macallan/Scotland on Sunday Prize for his short story "Sleet and Snow", from the 1995 collection *Poor Angels and Other Stories*). Dolan has also been involved in a number of UNESCO schemes for the care of children in need (in Venezuela, Namibia and Armenia) and collaborates with Glasgow's social services. Among current projects are: the development of a feature film from *Sabina!* (with Pelicula Productions), and a play, provisionally entitled *Restless Ocean*, commissioned by Borderline Theatre, to be staged at the 1998 Edinburgh International Festival. After winning the Fringe First prize at the 1996 Edinburgh Festival, *Sabina!* was produced in Pamplona (Spanish translation) and Milan (Scotsfest, April 1997; original version). A year later, the play opened in London (Pleasance theatre, 1-21 March). All quotations will be noted parenthetically in the text and are taken from the script published by Faber in 1998.
12. See Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994. The author extrapolates the concept of the performativity of subjectivity from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), extending to identity in general Butler's notion that gender is "performatively constructed by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (118).
13. Leslie Finlay, director of *Sabina!*, parodically echoing Kundera. (Ann Donald, "Delayed Reaction", *The Herald*, 27 August 1996.)
14. As Tereza points out, the typically Western myth about Eastern women's "hotness" and sexual promiscuity has conferred credibility to Sandra's faked story: "Oh you must have loved that, Matthew. Your own private little whore. (to Sandra) So, what—all us Czech women are prostitutes, now?" (63). Earlier in the play, Sandra had funnily explained the same cultural stereotype for the benefit of an amazed Tereza—she is therefore well aware of the gender/nationalist stereotypes she has played on:

TEREZA: What makes you think he [Matthew] is interested in me?

SANDRA: You're Czech, aren't you?

TEREZA: What's that got to do with it?

SANDRA: Everyone knows that all Czech women are intelligent and sophisticated and go like bunnies.

[...] TEREZA: Who says?

SANDRA: It's common knowledge. All Czech women have these great big difficult books which they put under their backs so they can do it in weird positions with all the men. And the guys are all university

professors except that they work as window cleaners. Naturally, they read them first. The books. Czech women do. And then they lend them to the men afterwards. In the West it's more acceptable to just have a smoke. (11)

15. The statue/sculptor metaphor figures strongly in the play. A dejected Sandra gives vent to her existential malaise in a fairy tale where a lonesome girl creates Snowflake, a little friend to play with, a snow puppet so skilfully built that it comes to life, but is doomed to melt away when the thaw starts. This story of existential void and of the pain of the dissolution of identity is a reversal of the fairy-tale account of her romantic youth in a small Bohemian village which Sabina invents for Matthew. In this story, poetic images of icy water and crossing rivers serve as a preliminary to Sandra and Matthew's sexual encounter.
16. On the subject, see John Orr's extensive discussion of Pirandello's challenge to the dramatic illusion of reality, and to the reality of personal identity in particular, in his *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture: Play and Performance from Beckett to Shepard*, London: Macmillan, 1991. In the first chapter, entitled "Modernism and Tragicomedy", Orr describes the sense of existential vertigo experienced by characters in Pirandello's theatre, and its disruptive epistemological consequences on the audience, in these terms:

His characters desperately want to perform in order to communicate who they are and what they feel, but when they perform they no longer know who they are, only that they are no longer themselves. Performance installs itself between what they are forced to be and what they consider to be their true selves. Their nature and their personas part company. The only possible reconciliation of the two is for them to believe in the illusion they have created. Our sense of what human nature is, and how the theatrical persona "represents" it, is called brutally into question. (3)

17. Christopher Harvie, "The Politics of Stevenson", in Jenni Calder (ed.), *Stevenson and Victorian Scotland*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, 107-125: 118.
18. Chris Dolan interviewed by the present author, cit. The potential self-destructiveness of the clash between individual aspirations and social constraints is also hinted at in Mike Cullen's *The Collection* (1995) and Rona Munro's dark comedy *Your Turn to Clean the Stairs* (1992), as well as in Liz Lochhead's reworking of the Frankenstein myth in *Blood and Ice* (1984). Even Irvine Welsh's novels could be seen as a variation on the Jekyll and Hyde motif, with their recurrent theme of people cheating their consciousness through drugs in order to become someone else.
19. Chris Dolan interviewed by Ann Donald, art. cit.
20. Chris Dolan interviewed by the present author, cit.
21. See Orr, op. cit.
22. Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964: "Saint Augustin dans la Cité de Dieu accuse cette similitude d'action entre la peste qui tue sans détruire d'organes et le théâtre qui, sans tuer, provoque dans l'esprit non seulement d'un individu, mais d'un peuple, les plus mystérieuses altérations". (35-36) ["In *The City of God* St. Augustine complains of this similarity between the action of the plague that kills without destroying the organs and the theater which, without killing, provokes the most mysterious alterations in the mind of not only an individual but an entire populace". A. Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline

Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958, 26.]

23. Interview with the present author, cit.
24. Chambers, op. cit., 12.
25. Interview with the present author, cit.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. See Chambers, op. cit., and in particular the chapter “The Wound and the Shadow” (115-141); Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, op. cit., especially Chapter 1, 11-37.
29. Chambers, op. cit., 24.
30. “The Bank of Scotland has a long running TV and newspaper advert, claiming to be your ‘friend for life’” (Chris Dolan’s note in the *Borderline Theatre* script, 1996).
31. Tereza’s formalisms are contrasted throughout the scene with Sandra’s use of a very distinct Glaswegian demotic.
32. See this passage in the middle section of the play, when the initially playful bet between Tereza and Sandra turns sour:

TEREZA: I consider myself a woman of honour. I’ll make you a deal.  
If you do get him to propose—in front of me—your reward will be to let him go, without knowing who you really are.

SANDRA: And if you win—what do you get?

TEREZA: Peace of mind. The knowledge that people always prefer the truth. That they will fight against lies and deception.

SANDRA: Just let go of it, will you?

TEREZA: Letting go is up to you, Sandra. You can call it off at any time.

*Pause.*

TEREZA: I didn’t think so. You’re a coward. The truth is everything.

SANDRA: But I’m not lying! I’m more me when I’m Sabina than when I’m Sandra. Sabina fits me like a glove. I feel like me when I’m her.

TEREZA: What kind of honesty is that? It is all right that he thinks you are Sabina? You are *not* Sabina! You should tell him you are Sandra. For once do the decent thing and tell the truth. I still have enough faith in human nature to believe that he won’t do it. In his heart, he knows that this is all a ... sham. Take it to that point. We’ll see. (46-47)

33. Chambers, op. cit., 133 (my italics).
34. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, op. cit., 38.
35. “The cross on the Scottish flag” (Dolan’s note in the *Borderline Theatre* script, 1996).
36. Today Michael Billington, the influential *Guardian* critic, can certainly no longer afford to admit candidly, as he did in an article prior to the 1996 Edinburgh Festival, that he knew of “no significant Scottish playwrights” (Interview with Chris Dolan, *Three Weeks*, summer 1996).
37. In the play, a top model from the Milan fashion industry figures as one of Sandra’s favourite performances, a pose she used to assume when clubbing with her friends.
38. Chris Dolan, press conference held at Milan’s British Council.
39. Don Sparling, in his article on “The New Literatures and Post-Colonial Studies” (*Moving the Borders*, cit., 382-386), suggests that the readiness with which post-



colonial issues have been assimilated by Czech academics and students has got to do with the century-long history of subjugation and colonization suffered by the country: “300 years under the Habsburgs, from 1620-1918, when the Czech language and culture came very close to being absorbed by the language and culture of Austria and Germany, subsequently a second and even briefer period of (somewhat limited) independence (not even three years), and then more than forty years under the Russians” (384).