

**National Theatre of Scotland at 20: Culture, Democracy,
and the Stateless Nation
23 October 2026
Scottish Storytelling Centre (and online)**

An unconference organised in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), The British Academy Early Career Researcher Network (ECRN), Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), University of Edinburgh, Robert Gordon University, Stories, Place and Northern Communities Research Centre (SPEIR), LLSETI Research Laboratory at Université Savoie Mont Blanc (Chambéry, France), Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies (RIISS), University of Aberdeen, as well as the Scottish Storytelling Centre and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival.

9:30 - 10:00 Registration – Court

10:00 - 11:15 Session 1: Lightning Panel and Audience Discussion

A panel of invited guests will spark the discussion with 5-minute reflections on the NTS's 20th Anniversary and Scotland's culture and democracy today, drawing on their experiences across theatre-making, cultural scholarship, playwriting and community participation. We will hear from **Jackie Wylie** (Artistic Director and Co-Chief Executive, National Theatre of Scotland), **Hannah Lavery** (Poet, Playwright and Performer), **Dr Stefanie Lehner** (Senior Lecturer, Queen's University Belfast, specialising in culture, conflict and reconciliation), and **Steve Byrne** (Chief Executive, Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland). The session will be chaired by **Dr Paula Sledzinska** (Visiting Research Fellow at IASH).

11:15 - 11:30 Coffee break/ Video Presentations – Court

11:30 - 12:30 Session 2: Nicola Sturgeon in Conversation with Joyce McMillan

Bringing together insights from political leadership, cultural advocacy and critical commentary, this conversation between **Nicola Sturgeon** and **Joyce McMillan** will reflect on some of Scotland's most influential dramatic and literary works, and the ways in which they have shaped Scotland's civic imagination. It offers a rare opportunity to hear Scotland's longest-serving First Minister and one of the country's most respected cultural critics reflect together on the power of dramatic and literary culture to influence national consciousness, foster dialogue and democratic resilience, and contribute to the making of contemporary Scotland.

12:30 - 13:15 Lunch / Video Presentations – Court

13:15 – 14:15 Roundtable 1 - Court

14:15 - 10min coffee break

14:25 – 15:25 Roundtable 2 - Court

15:25 10min coffee break

15:35 – 16:35 Roundtable 3 – Court

16:35 – Informal closing reception

Session 1: Lightning Panel and Audience Discussion

Jackie Wylie

Jackie Wylie has been Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the National Theatre of Scotland since 2017. Graduating from the University of Glasgow with a degree in Theatre, Film and Television Studies, Jackie began working in film and television production before moving to The Arches where she went on to become Artistic Director in 2008. During her tenure from 2008-2015, Jackie transformed the venue into one of Europe's most celebrated multi-arts venues while supporting and nurturing new Scottish talent. She developed a host of contemporary Scottish artists commissioning work, originally produced in Scotland, which then toured the UK and internationally. She also founded Take Me Somewhere, a Glasgow wide international performance festival based at the Tramway. As one of Scotland's most dynamic cultural leaders, Jackie believes in the power of culture to shape society. To date, her tenure at National Theatre of Scotland has been notable for a broad ranging programme of work which ranges in scope and scale from the intimate to the epic. In that time the organisation has gone from strength to strength, innovating digitally to reach millions during the global pandemic, then focussing on bringing audiences back into Scotland's theatres and venues large and small through uniquely engaging work which invites conversation and discussion about Scotland as a nation. She was a fellow of the Clore leadership programme in 2016/17, was made an honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Glasgow in 2022 and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2023. She is also a board member of the Scottish Music Industry Association.

Hannah Lavery

Hannah Lavery is a Scottish poet and playwright. She is the former Edinburgh Makar and an Honorary Fellow of the Association of Scottish Literature. Her poetry and theatre work explore themes of identity, belonging, family, history and social justice. Her acclaimed productions include *The Drift*, *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* and *The Protest*, and her writing has been widely published and performed across the UK. Through poetry, theatre and collaborative projects, her work draws on personal and collective histories, exploring questions of memory, community and belonging.

Stefanie Lehner

Dr Stefanie Lehner (s.lehner@qub.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Irish Literature and Culture at Queen's University, Belfast, and Fellow at the Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice (QUB). Her research explores the role of the arts, specifically fiction and performance, in conflict transformation processes, with a focus on the Northern Irish context. She also researches and teaches on representations of trauma and memory in (Northern) Irish drama, fiction, film, and photography and her current work is on queer theatre productions from Belfast. She is author of *Subaltern Ethics in Contemporary Scottish and Irish Literature* (Palgrave, 2011) and co-author of *Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation* (Bloomsbury, 2023)

Steve Byrne

Steve Byrne is a singer and folklorist from Arbroath, best known for his work with award-winning Scots folksong band Malinky. A graduate of the School of Scottish Studies, in his time he has been Traditional Arts Officer for Edinburgh, song cataloguer for the Kist o Riches/Tobar an Dualchais sound archive project, and helped secure the papers of Hamish Henderson for the nation. For a number of years he led the community learning project Scots Music Group. He has worked variously as a record producer, author and broadcaster, and as folk singing adviser on Netflix's "Outlaw King". In 2019 he was voted Scots Singer of the Year in the Scots Trad Music Awards. Since 2023, he has been Chief Executive of TRACS (Traditional Arts & Culture Scotland), the UNESCO-accredited national folk arts body bringing together traditional music, dance, storytelling and crafts, advocating for Scotland's intangible cultural heritage at home and abroad.

Session 2: Nicola Sturgeon in Conversation with Joyce McMillan

Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP

Nicola Sturgeon was Scotland's longest serving First Minister - serving for almost nine years - and the first woman to hold the office. She led Scotland through Brexit and the Covid pandemic, working with five UK Prime Ministers along the way. As SNP leader, she led her party to eight successive election victories. Having joined the SNP as a teenager, Nicola earned a law degree from the University of Glasgow, and worked as a solicitor before entering frontline politics. She was elected as one of the inaugural members of the re-established Scottish Parliament. Before being elected First Minister, Nicola was the Deputy First Minister. She was also Scotland's Health Secretary - the longest-serving in that role in devolved government - before a period as Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities. She also helped lead the Yes campaign in the 2014 independence referendum. As leader of the SNP she steered the party to a position of electoral dominance in Scotland, and to being the third party in Westminster, whilst also establishing herself as a dedicated representative of Scotland internationally, and a highly influential voice within Scottish and UK politics. Nicola considers the personal and professional lessons in leadership, decision-making and resilience that a career at the top of politics has taught. With extensive experience working with colleagues, partners and opponents in the Scottish and UK Parliaments, she looks at placing values and purpose at the core of what you do, and how to bring others with you even if they don't entirely agree. She also shares her experience of dealing with the scrutiny and pressure leadership brings, the importance of trust and empathy, and how to know when to stand by your judgements and when to change your thinking. Away from politics, Nicola is an avid reader, citing literature as one of the loves of her life. Her autobiography, *Frankly*, is a widely-praised reflection on a remarkable personal and public life. From her early life growing up in Ayrshire, through the relationships, experiences and events that shaped her politics, to her time leading her country, it's a candid exploration of the challenges, regrets, hopes and accomplishments of a singular leader.

Joyce McMillan

Joyce McMillan is theatre critic of *The Scotsman*, and also writes a political and social commentary column for the paper. She has been involved in many campaigns for democracy and human rights, both in Scotland and internationally, and has been a freelance journalist, based in Edinburgh, Scotland, for more than 25 years. She was a Visiting Professor in the School of Drama and Creative Industries at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh from 2006 to 2010.

Roundtable presentations

Panel 1: NTS and the Scottish Performing Arts Landscape

Donald Smith, 'Fighting for a Future'

I was involved frontline with the campaign for and then stage-by-stage creation of The National Theatre for Scotland 1986-2006. But, having covered that process in 'Playing National: The Scottish Experiment' (a paper written for the centenary of the Abbey Theatre in 2024), my contribution will focus on the 'why's', i.e. the issues and experiences that revived the National Theatre struggle. As then Director of The Netherbow, subsequently the Scottish Storytelling Centre, my core challenge was to sustain (sixties gains and seventies edge) and widen creative opportunities as the Scottish arts got hammered by Westminster. At the same time as the arts came under this direct political attack, previous models of elite public patronage were being exposed as ill-suited to a broader and deeper engagement with Scottish society in all its aspects - local, national and international. What did that feel like and what were the collective responses? Digging into these motivating factors explains the debate about suitable models for Ntos and the actual outcomes and subsequent evolution. However, this is more oral testimony from a conflict than a policy analysis. It felt like an existential struggle for the future and key actions emerged 'on the hoof' and in the midst of live controversy.

Donald Smith is a storyteller of Scotland, theatre-maker, and noted performer. Inspired by his time at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, where he researched the pioneer feminist Naomi Mitchison, Donald became Director of The Netherbow Arts Centre and founding Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre. He also led the task group to establish The National Theatre of Scotland. In 2023 he received the Hamish Henderson Award for lifetime service to the Scottish arts. He is a longstanding activist in Earth Charter International, and co-founder of *The Earth Stories Collection*.

Trish Reid, 'The NTS in Theatre Scholarship'

The impact of the NTS has been significant, and the company has achieved sustained cultural prominence, attracting praise for its extensive work in Scotland and for bringing the work of Scottish theatre-makers to international attention. Its dispersed model immediately attracted positive attention from theatre scholars interested in its potentials for destabilising traditional models for 'national theatres'. In this talk, I collate these responses, consider their shared themes and concerns, and ask what, if anything, the contribution of scholars can add to our understanding of the significance of the company as it celebrates its twentieth birthday.

Trish Reid is Professor of Theatre and Performance and Head of the School of Arts and Communication Design at the University of Reading. She is the author of *Theatre & Scotland* (2013), *The Theatre of Anthony Neilson* (2017) and *Theatre and Performance in Contemporary Scotland* (2024). Trish has published widely on contemporary British theatre and its engagement with politics in the broadest sense. With Liz Tomlin, she is general editor of the Cambridge series, *Elements in Theatre, Performance and the Political* and with Claire Cochrane, Catherine Hindson and Lynette Goddard, of *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth-Century British Theatre and Performance* (2024-25).

Georgia Grainger, 'Building the Case, Building the Room: FST and the Advocacy of Scottish Performing Arts'

For five decades, the Federation of Scottish Theatre has worked at the intersection of advocacy and infrastructure, acting as the connective tissue that allows Scotland's performing arts sector to speak with a collective voice. I will briefly look at that role through FST's part in the campaign for a National Theatre of Scotland, and the case it made for a national theatre without walls, rooted in the existing ecology of companies, venues and artists across the country. I will then consider in more depth how that advocacy continues today, often through the quieter work of connecting: creating shared spaces in which the sector can identify its own priorities. This positioning also arises tensions as a membership body representing a range opposing needs and interests; I will discuss how we are changing the shape of that approach to best serve our sector. In a moment when questions of culture and democracy are live, in this contribution I will reflect on what it means to advocate for an entire ecosystem rather than a single institution.

Dr Georgia Grainger is Advocacy Lead for the Federation of Scottish Theatre. She has a background as a historian, library worker, and campaigner. She has previously worked at the NI Assembly and Scottish Parliament. Her current work for FST covers research, policy, and advocacy, including representing the performing arts to funders and policy-makers. She is also working to raise capacity around campaigning, advocacy, and demonstrating impact across the sector. She enjoys musicals and, unsurprisingly, theatre with a political focus.

Panel 2: Theatre and Inclusion

Jack Dickson, 'In the Culture Wars, who are the real Traitors...?'

As a non-binary writer and community-based cultural activist from a working-class background, I'd like to engage with the idea that there remains a huge population of working and under-class Scots left behind by the Arts in Scotland, via this provocation: Does the Scottish Creative Orthodoxy remain stubbornly aspirationally middle-class in thought and empathy, to the detriment and ultimate betrayal of working / underclass creatives and audiences - leading to a persistently fractured nation, with the unity we require to heal receding ever further into the future?

I've worked in film / TV and theatre over a 30-year writing career. I've witnessed opportunities both for working/underclass-class creatives and audiences decline worryingly, potentially limiting any ability to build influence on the so-called Creative scene and to engage with material which speaks to their life-experience, respectively. As a result, I fear our already-divided country is becoming even more divided - and our Creative Orthodoxy is, if not actively contributing to this state of affairs, certainly doing less than it should to address this class / representational-imbalance.

There is an increasing underclass in Scotland and it has roots in the bulk of the population: those who actually purchase the National Lottery tickets which pay the wages of those who people our Creative Orthodoxy. Do those in the Creative Establishment even register the existence of these, their fellow citizens? And if they do, are they still - at best - behaving like missionaries delivering the "The Word"? If so, seems to me, that's not working.

How do we reform the existing paradigm of well-meaning middle-class creatives going into working-class / under-class communities and changing THEM to having our practice informed, enriched and changed BY them?

Is it a gatekeeper problem? A training problem? A diversity / life-experience problem? A uniquely Scottish problem?

I have no answers but, obviously, lots of questions. And I am sick of walking past The Citizens Theatre in Glasgow and seeing that "The Citz is back: ye comin'?" poster - when NO-ONE who either works there or attends as an audience member speaks like that!?

Born in Ayrshire and a Scottish Society of Playwrights Fellowship awardee of 2024, **Jack Dickson** has written for *River City* and *Play Pie and a Pint*. His *Jas Anderson Investigates* series of Glasgow-set novels (1997-2002) was recently republished by the San Francisco-based *Requeered Tales*. For the past five years, having made peace with his roots and his fellow citizens, Jack focuses on working with communities in the West of Scotland, curating their untold stories while shamelessly feeding his own soul. A senior instructor with the T'ai Chi Internal Arts Union, Jack currently leads T'ai Chi classes in Possilpark, North Glasgow.

Hannah Simpson and Judith Drake, 'The Accessible Stage (and Auditorium): Disability Access in Scottish Theatre Today'

We live at a moment when disabled people's contributions to social life and to the arts is in acute crisis. It has long been the case that individuals with a disability have significantly lower rates of arts attendance than others (Smith 2017), despite Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities making explicit the right of people with disabilities to "enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres". Although the UN having recently criticised the UK for "grave and systematic violations of disabled people's rights" (Scottish Human Rights Commission, 2024), government rhetoric continues to emphasise narratives of fraud and dependency to justify further punitive policy, and the recent Access to Work cuts have resulted in several successful theatre-makers, including Tourettes Hero's Jess Thom and Graeae's Jenny Sealey, struggling to continue their groundbreaking work. In a world where disabled access to the arts – as practitioners or as audience members – can be withdrawn at any moment, it is vital that the stories we stage, and the practitioners and audiences we welcome in doing so, offer a genuinely accessible space for our increasingly marginalised disabled population.

This collaborative presentation with Scottish-based theatre company Birds of Paradise points to some of the key practical work that arts makers can do to make their stages and auditoria more accessible to disabled artists and audiences. Drawing examples from Birds of Paradise's work – including their collaboration with NTS on *My Left/Right Foot* – we speak both to the vital role of theatre and the arts in helping to shape broader socio-cultural ideas of disability, and the value that disabled practitioners bring to the field. Emphasising aesthetic innovation and an ideology of mutual care and fun, we hope to spark further conversation about what practical support we within the industry can offer each other in shaping a democratic, culturally radical arts space.

Dr Hannah Simpson is Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at the University of Edinburgh. She is the author of the award-winning *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave, 2022) and *Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Witness: Pain in Post-War Francophone Drama* (Oxford University Press, 2022; winner of the TAPRA David Brady Monograph Award). She is co-editor of the "Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Disability" series.

Judith Drake is a doctoral candidate in European Theatre in the School of Languages, Literature and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh. She collaborates frequently with Birds of Paradise, and has worked as Academic Theatre Consultant for Birds of Paradise and the National Theatre of Scotland.

Struan Kennedy, 'Staging Changes'

I intend to deliver a presentation on theatre's role within a much broader, long-term project of cultural peacebuilding. I would discuss the nature of statelessness and how particular conditions and contexts might induce acutely negative connotations. For example, in a personal setting, to be devoid of emotional state seems stark and bleak. Politically too, a group may be cut off and adrift amid the harsh, dehumanising matrix of border control. However, in the flux of a potential independent Scotland, a sense of statelessness conjures up a more positive ability to adapt and change. Stateless then liberates us from conventions that lock us into a bound place, being freer from strict, rigid forms than other polities. I would connect this flexibility and fluidity with the pioneering model of the NTS as a 'theatre without walls'.

I would explore the implications of locating drama within a wide range of sites and how this might support localised yet multi-dimensional peacebuilding.

Specifically, my background focuses on building a culture of positive peace. This is defined and differentiated from 'negative peace' (absence of war) as more ambitiously striving to reduce/remove the root causes of conflict. Another tenet of this approach is recognising a more holistic interpretation of 'conflict'. This compels us to tackle difficult issues within Scotland and not assume that any strategies or solutions are ready for export! I would argue for the NTS to embrace theatre's power of serving as a vital safe space for critical thinking. As a fertile testing ground, alternative viewpoints, actions and emotions can be dramatised and embodied. Progressive performance can facilitate a critique of reductionist narratives which permeate our society. My experience in peace research and, more recently with Theatre of the Oppressed, encourages me to advocate for Scottish drama to illuminate more inclusive and egalitarian social arrangements.

Struan Kennedy: My background is in art history which transitioned to cultural peacebuilding via a practice-based Masters from Glasgow School of Art. I worked at the International Conflict Research Institute and for the Sarajevo-based NGO, 'Post-Conflict Research Centre'. After this, I worked freelance on extensive projects that looked to tackle paramilitary control in communities in the North of Ireland (NI). These experiences led to my PhD in applied, contemporary history at Northumbria University. This sought to disarm weaponised murals and masculinities in NI. More recently, I have merged this with an acute passion for Theatre of the Oppressed, clowning and performance poetry.

Kfir Lapid-Mashall, '*ARE YOU ENTERTAINED? A Queer Satire of Status and State*'

My student visa screwed me. According to UK immigration policies, I was forbidden from "working as an entertainer." As a queer and immigrant artist who moved to Scotland to escape a violent regime and pursue doctoral research in theatre and performance, this restriction felt particularly draconian. Unsatisfied with being screwed by the law in that way, I performed an act of screwing with it. In *ARE YOU ENTERTAINED?* the premise was simple: no matter what I do on stage, whenever I ask the audience "are you entertained?", I need them to shout back "no," or else I'm in breach of my real visa conditions. *ARE YOU ENTERTAINED?* was a legally compliant and non-spectacular event that definitely was *not* a political cabaret about UK immigration law.

In this provocation, I will consider how *ARE YOU ENTERTAINED?* choreographed a transgression of borders and nationhood. In protecting precarious and marginalised cultural production in Scotland that plays at the edge of legality, this provocation will call attention to the political potentials of the performance of insubordination against xenophobic immigration policies for institutes of a stateless nation.

Dr Kfir Lapid-Mashall is a queer artist-scholar based in Glasgow whose practice messes with the conflictual experience of (in)justice. Spanning across theatre, performance art, live art, and dance, his work was featured globally in festivals, underground clubs and cabarets, performance venues, universities, and galleries, evoking societal issues like the global refugee crisis, worker's rights, the freedom of artistic expression, the policing of queer bodies and public sex, and the UK immigration policy. Kfir serves as Reviews Editor of *Performance Research* journal and is a convenor of Bodies and Performance working group at Theatre and Performance Research Association.

Panel 3: Advocacy, Policy and Democratic Engagement

Kathryn Welch and Joseph Peach, 'Aiming big: Building a long-term, fair and sustainable future for the cultural sector'

In the run-up to the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election, Culture Counts began building the case for the development of A Culture Act for Scotland in the new parliament. The call for dedicated cultural legislation was supported across the cultural sector and recognised across the political spectrum - parties holding 85 of the 129 seats in the new Parliament made manifesto commitments to explore it over the next five years. The opportunity to realise these commitments now offers a groundbreaking opportunity for us to build a stronger and more sustainable culture sector. Cultural legislation could change the basis on which decisions are made - thinking longer-term about the impact and need for funding, and working more closely with those in education, health and community development to recognise the impact of culture on the whole of people's lives.

Join us to imagine what an ambitious, fair and collaborative Culture Act for Scotland could look like. What new opportunities could it create and defend, and what scale of change can we imagine? As artists, leaders, creative practitioners and peers, what would a sustainable future for culture really look like? And how could we make the most of this opportunity to get there?

Kathryn Welch (she/her) and **Joseph Peach** (he/him) are co-Directors of Culture Counts, Scotland's advocacy network for the arts, heritage and creative industries. Kathryn's background is in participatory arts and community-rooted creative practice, and her work explores the connections between arts and social change. Joseph is a musician by background, having spent many years touring, making records and teaching, mainly in Scottish folk music. Alongside, Joseph has had a varied career in policy, research and public affairs.

Joshua Oliver, 'The Theatre of Audacity Art: A Catalyst for National Deliberation and Lived Experience Policy Design'

This presentation introduces a newly established Scottish civic arts charity, Hive Mind Speaks, who are exploring what might happen if the cultural power of interventionist art were deliberately connected to democratic participation and policy influence.

The presentation follows a four-stage civic arts model currently being developed through Hive Mind Speaks, moving from artistic intervention to civic capital, deliberative mass publics and credible policy knowledge generation capable of influencing decision making.

At the centre of this work is an emerging aesthetic concept I'm proposing of Audacity Art, concerned with artistic practice capable of cutting through conventional cultural boundaries through the audacity of the act, its execution or the proposition it asks an audience to entertain. Rather than treating attention as an end in itself, the work asks what might happen if that cultural reach became the beginning of a wider civic process.

These ideas are being explored through my own artistic practice and additional doctoral research with the POLART research team at the University of Glasgow. The model is not presented as a proven solution, but as an experiment containing significant tensions between artistic freedom and democratic legitimacy, provocation and public trust, mass

participation and meaningful deliberation and citizen led processes and institutional authority.

The presentation invites the room to consider whether the freedom, spectacle and provocation of cultural practice might play a greater role in bringing more people into democratic life.

Joshua Oliver is an Edinburgh-based, self-described Audacity Artist, as well as founder and Artistic Director of Hive Mind Speaks, a Scottish civic arts charity exploring how artistic interventions can catalyse democratic participation and policy influence. His previous provocations include Human Weighted Blanket, In the Name of Clericalism, NHS 65 and EDI Doorways, the latter developed in partnership with the University of Strathclyde. Hive Mind Speaks is working with civic technology partner Crown Shy to develop digital mass deliberation tools, while Joshua's practice now forms the basis of doctoral research with POLART at the University of Glasgow, investigating Audacity Art, civic capital, deliberative mass publics and lived experience in policy design.

Amie Taylor, 'Fun Palaces, Cultural Democracy and Creating Change from the Grassroots Up'

Fun Palaces is a nationwide campaign for cultural democracy. We believe that everyone should have a say in what counts as culture, who gets to make it, where it happens and who gets to participate. The Fun Palaces campaign was born out of a hunger for a fairer, more equitable culture sector. Along the way, we have learned that making a Fun Palace also brings communities together, including those that may not otherwise meet or speak to each other. We've always stood by the premise that people may not vote the same way or have the same beliefs, but that we can meet on common ground when we try to make a mobile together, get to grips with a musical instrument or share our love of seed swapping. We know that a hyper-local, grassroots and bottom-up approach to cultural engagement supports community cohesion and helps develop a more inclusive cultural landscape – locally, nationally and internationally.

Join us to imagine what could happen if we were to orientate our cultural landscape around a recognition and celebration of the genius in everyone. What might be possible if we truly believe that arts can change the world for the better, if we trust and resource communities to create the activity they most want and need, and if we decide that we can do this together, locally, with radical fun. Bring your skills, your passions, your curiosity and your questions, and let's make something together!

Amie Taylor is a writer, theatre-maker, facilitator and the director of the Fun Palaces Campaign; a national campaign for cultural democracy. She has written three books: The Big Book of LGBTQ+ Activities, The Monster Book of Feelings and Pride Families. She has written short plays, made theatre shows for children and toured theatres, festivals and schools with this work. Amie founded and ran the LGBTQ+ Arts Review for 6 years, managing a team of theatre reviewers across the UK.

Video provocations

Elsie Albis, 'I am Filipinising/Bikolising Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Scotland: What do I have to do with NTS20?'

Scotland has four seasons. The Philippines has two. Scotland has some of the best tap water in the world! The Philippines has abundant water, but it is not generally safe to drink. Scotland has water everywhere, and so does the Philippines. How are these two countries shaped by their waters, climates, and landscapes? How different are they? How similar?

And somewhere between these two places sits Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. What happens when I, a Filipina academic, translate *The Tempest* into Bikol, a language spoken in the southernmost part of Luzon Island, while living and researching in Scotland? Is Scotland part of the translation process?

This context leads me to my title: what do I have to do with the Theatre of Scotland? Does the answer lie in *The Tempest*: the magical island, the storm, displacement, struggles over belonging, and the question of who gets to tell the story?

Is Scotland co-creating with me in my ecotranslation of *The Tempest*?

Dr Elsie C. Albis is an IASH Postdoctoral Fellow under the 90th British Council Anniversary Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh. She is working on her Bikol translation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She is an Associate Professor of Literature at the Ateneo de Naga University, Bikol, Philippines.

Ayesha Awan, 'Making Space: Marginalised Voices, Cultural Institutions, and the Practice of Democratic Participation (work-in-progress)'

Cultural institutions, such as national theatres, universities, civic organisations, are not neutral spaces. They shape who participates in democratic life, whose narratives are legitimised, and whose voices carry weight in public conversation. As an international Muslim woman academic and Early Career Researcher based in Belfast, I am interested in what genuine democratic participation requires of institutions as lived practice. Belfast provides a particular lens: a post-conflict city where the consequences of whose culture dominates and whose is suppressed have been visceral and lasting. The deliberate work of cross-community dialogue and the amplification of silenced voices here illustrate both the difficulty and the necessity of inclusive cultural participation. The emerging argument of this work is that cultural democracy does not happen by opening doors, it requires institutions to actively redistribute who shapes the conversation, who is resourced to participate, and whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate. Early career researchers and practitioners from underrepresented backgrounds navigate this daily, often sustaining that work without dedicated funding or structural support.

Drawing on Belfast as a comparative case and on my own experience navigating academic and civic institutions across different cultural contexts, this talk asks what it genuinely takes — structurally, practically, and institutionally — for cultural organisations to strengthen democratic life and make participation real beyond aspiration. Drawing on Belfast as a comparative case and on my own experience navigating academic and civic institutions across different cultural contexts, this talk asks what it genuinely takes — structurally, practically, and institutionally — for cultural organisations to strengthen democratic life and make participation real beyond aspiration.

Dr Ayesha Awan is a Lecturer in Operations Management and Programme Director for the MSc Business Development and Innovation at Ulster University Business School, Belfast. An Early Career Researcher and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, she brings over fifteen years of professional experience in financial services across the GCC region. Her research explores how individuals and organisations engage with institutions, technology, and changing service environments, with particular interests in trust, inclusion and participation. Her current work also considers how institutions can create more meaningful opportunities for underrepresented voices to participate and contribute to public and organisational life.

Babatunde Allen Bakare, ‘Mirroring the Past, Acting the Present and Performing the Future: The Revolutionary Power of the Scottish National Theatre’

The establishment of the National Theatre of Scotland in the aftermath of Scottish devolution marked a significant development in the nation’s cultural policy by introducing a commissioning model described as a “theatre without walls” rather than creating a permanent theatre building or resident ensemble. This study examines how that institutional design has enabled the theatre to preserve historical memory, engage contemporary public concerns and imagine future cultural possibilities. It addresses a gap in scholarship by shifting attention from individual productions to the relationship between organisational form and national cultural influence. The research aims to evaluate the extent to which the National Theatre of Scotland has transformed ideas of representation, accessibility and public participation while advancing Scotland’s cultural presence at home and abroad. Using qualitative analysis of policy documents, archival materials, selected productions and scholarly literature, the study demonstrates that the institution has expanded opportunities for collaboration, activated historic and civic spaces as sites of performance, and encouraged sustained public dialogue on questions of history, identity and social change. It concludes that the National Theatre of Scotland has redefined the function of a national theatre by proving that enduring cultural impact depends less on a permanent building than on sustained public engagement, artistic innovation and institutional vision.

Dr Babatunde Allen Bakare is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He earned a BA (Hons), Certificate in Dramatic Arts and Certificate in Music at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife between 1996 and 2003. In 2005, he obtained a certificate in British and Irish Literature at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He completed his Master of Philosophy in the University of Oslo, Norway in 2008. He worked as Producer/Scriptwriter for African Independent Television (AIT) Abuja for over 5 years. He completed PhD in Drama and Theatre Studies at Stellenbosch University, South Africa in 2018.

Shriya Bhagwat, 'Ruptures when belonging'

I propose a presentation that offers a creative provocation on the mechanics (and consequences) of belonging, migration and cultural representation within Scotland's civic and creative landscapes. This is drawn from my current work-in-progress manuscript, a narrative non-fiction book which is deeply informed by the complexities of navigating the world as a 'member of the diaspora'.

This talk is at the intersection of agency and circumstance for women navigating multi-layered cultural and social identities. It aligns with the Unconference theme of Marginalised Voices. I aim to interrogate how (and if) exclusion impacts the inner life of the individual. Ultimately, this provocation addresses critical stakes: If mainstream cultural organisations fail to actively foster representation and belonging, then unaddressed exclusion will leach into existing social fissures and inevitably risk being weaponised. Through this lens, the session will invite dialogue on how radical, inclusive storytelling can heal societal divides.

Shriya Bhagwat was the recipient of the prestigious Michael King Writers Residency in 2022 as an emerging writer. In 2024, *An Interrogation of Choices* was long-listed for the Michael Giffkins Prize for an Unpublished Novel. Her short stories have appeared in *Between You and Me: Culture in Context* (Rouge Publishing), *Coldnoon Literary Journal*, *Branch and Root: The Anthology of Trees* (Shooting Star Press, Australia), *Ko Aotearoa Tātou/We Are New Zealand* (Otago University Press), and *A Clear Dawn: New Asian NZ Writing* (Auckland University Press). She has also written comment pieces for the Asia Media Centre.

Lynne Campbell, 'Eye to eye, mind to mind, heart to heart: Scottish traditions as technology for connected problem solving'

Scotland's tradition of ceilidh is a democratic space, where contributions are welcome from all participants. I'm referring to traditional ceilidhs; where people would share poetry, song, stories and tunes with each other, not ceilidhs as we understand them today where the focus is dancing.

Through my parallel careers in economic development, business and organisational support and design thinking, and in trad music and storytelling, I have learned that three meta functions of a trad ceilidh and a workshop are the same; sharing knowledge, generating insight, and cultivating connection between participants.

I believe that Ceilidh can be employed as a method to better deliver existing mechanisms for social development, effectively turning civic moments of decision making into ceilidhs by bringing in cultural elements like tunes, songs, poems and stories.

Folk practice has a democratizing effect. Through folk practice, we empathise with each other and connect over our similarities, and make bridges over differences. This is essential in helping us collectively process the challenges that come with 21st century life, and build our future together. The very experience of sharing in folk practice is a connected one, and prepares a group for effective collaboration. Employing folk practices and mechanisms within decision-making structures help in building more effective collaborative outputs.

Most importantly, these sessions create connection. They spark good feeling in participants and because of this, greater engagement with the outcome. They become positive cultural moments in themselves. Ceilidh is a proven driver for societal connectedness. The Tartan Army did a great ambassadorial job for us on the world stage, and I think it's time we turned that positive cultural feeling on ourselves by embracing ceilidh culture in civic decision making. I would discuss this, share experiences in creating ceilidhs with national cultural bodies, and speculate in the future of ceilidh as a mechanism of democracy in Scotland.

Lynne Campbell is a Cultural Practitioner whose work integrates Ceilidh culture with strategic design tools to create environments in which people can solve problems from a place of connection. She advocates that the cultural practices in Scotland of storytelling, poetry, tunes and songs are technologies for connection that can be worked with to help us solve the problems we find ourselves with as citizens of the 21st century. A prizewinning Scots singer, writer, performer with a background in strategic design developed during her role as Strategic Lead for Design and Innovation at V&A Dundee, Lynne is also host of the Scots Language Awards and the Scottish Mushroom Podcast.

Flavia D'Avila, 'Don't Give Up The Dayjob'

Two articles, both alike in dignity were published in the same week... Neil Cooper wrote in *The Herald* about something Scottish theatre-makers already knew: that low pay, short contracts, and rising costs are making full-time practice economically impossible for a growing number of professionals. Greg Rook's "Qualified for Nothing" post on Substack was written from the visual art world, but the same issues are reflected in the theatre sector. Rook named the structural trap that arrives for artists in their early forties: they are employable only at the wrong level, and the market does not reward what twenty years of serious practice has actually made them.

Scottish theatre's development infrastructure (traineeships, residencies, assistant director schemes) is almost universally designed around full-time or near-full-time availability. This quietly encodes a definition of professional seriousness that an increasing number of serious professionals cannot meet.

It assumes a practitioner who does not have a parallel job, who does not have visa restrictions on working hours and minimum income thresholds, who does not have caring responsibilities. It was designed, in other words, for a practitioner the sector's own economics has made increasingly difficult to be.

The question this provocation puts to the room is: whose active participation in Scottish theatre culture does our development infrastructure actually enable? And what would we have to change if we answered that question honestly?

Dr Flavia D'Avila is a Brazilian-born, Edinburgh-based theatre director and producer with a PhD in devised intercultural theatre. She specialises in work that challenges performers and audiences alike to wrestle with complex ideas in meaningful, often unexpected ways. She has a particular passion for solo shows, working closely with performers to develop distinctive, character-led pieces that push the boundaries of storytelling. Flavia's recent focus has been on Knowledge Exchange Theatre, a unique strand of practice that bridges academic research and live performance. When not making theatre, Flavia can be found assisting Midlothian residents at the Council's headquarters in Dalkeith.

Nathalie Duclos, ‘Pushing back against the narrative of Scotland as a colony’

Recent events (the electoral rise of the radical-right Reform party, extreme-right rallies and demonstrations) have led to calls to “ditch the complacency of ‘this could never happen in Scotland’” with relation to the rise of far-right nationalism that has been observed across Europe in the past decades. My argument is that it is also necessary to react to another, parallel trend, namely the rising popularity within the Scottish independence movement of an ethnic branch of nationalism which sees Scotland as a colony.

While Scottish nationalism was until recently (and rather remarkably by international standards) almost exclusively civic in nature, the period since the late 2010s has seen the birth of new nationalist groups (parties such as Alba, or non-party groups such as Salvo or Liberation Scotland) in the wake of successive UK governments’ refusals to allow the organisation of a second independence referendum. Although these groups have not yet managed to gain a parliamentary presence, their ideas are increasingly being spread on social media such as X (former Twitter). Among these, the a-historical idea that Scotland is a colony (of England/the UK) has gained particular traction. Cultural institutions such as the NTS could have a role to play in countering this idea, in addition to – and perhaps in conjunction with? – the useful work currently being done (e.g. by museums) to better inform the population of Scotland’s role as a colonising country (rather than a colonised one).

Nathalie Duclos is a Professor of Scottish & British studies at the University of Toulouse (France). She specialises in Scottish politics, more particularly Scottish nationalism and the Scottish independence movement. She is currently the chair of the French Society for Scottish Studies (Société Française d’Études Écossaises).

Sandro Eich, ‘Can a National Theatre Be a Cultural Diplomat? Scotland through the Eyes of International Students’

What happens when a ‘national theatre’ enters an international classroom where the nation itself is constantly challenged and contested? Drawing on my experience of teaching National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) productions at the University of St Andrews and the Scottish Universities International Summer School, I explore how plays such as *Black Watch*, *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, *Enough of Him*, and productions such as *One Hundred Voices* have played a vital role in fostering a third space where international students can partake in lively, and sometimes uneasy, conversations about the role of the nation state in the twenty-first century. In these classrooms, Scotland is not a stable cultural object but something actively made and remade through performance and debate. The NTS acts here as a pedagogical tool that facilitates intellectual conversations which are not equitably accessible and possible to have for many international students where they come from. NTS productions enable students to discuss what it means to tell “national” stories in a stateless nation, who gets to speak for Scotland, and how these stories shift in the shadow of Brexit, resurgent nationalisms, and global conflicts around class, race, and gender. Through these conversations, the university classroom becomes a space where students can think and talk about their

civic and democratic ideals, transforming it into an experimental miniature public sphere which is messy, plural, and contested. This presentation fosters reflection on how NTS's work fulfils a cultural diplomacy function at the intersection of civic entertainment, cultural performance, and student engagement in global higher education in the twenty-first century.

Dr Sandro Eich teaches English literature and drama at the University of St Andrews and the Scottish Universities International Summer School (SUISS). He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (Advance HE) and has published on polycrisis imagery in contemporary social media, the relationship between digital media and the contemporary novel, and he is currently preparing a monograph on representations of whistleblowing in contemporary writing. He also works as Academic Policy Officer and Learning and Writing Centre Project Officer leading and supporting projects which deliver and enhance the University of St Andrews's Education and Student Experience strategic priorities.

Adam McElhinney, 'Reflections from Northern Ireland: The Dramaturgy of Pride Parades'

This video provocation at the NTS@20 Unconference spotlights research into Pride parades in Northern Ireland. Intersecting social movements, queer visibility, and acts of political/cultural expression, this presentation invites reflections from Scotland and other 'wee places' in often overlooked spaces (Taylor 2026).

Northern Ireland offers a complex backdrop for the study of Pride parades given its prolific parading cultures, symbolic visual traditions, and institutional regulation of public space (Nagle 2008). Annually, around 4000 parades take place, peaking in the summer months during 'marching season,' a period of intense ethnonationalist and hypermasculine parading, demonstrative of the cis-hetero hegemony which permeates Northern Irish society (Bennett 2024; Duggan 2010).

Amidst this backdrop, Pride parades offer an alternative 'queering of public space' (Valentine 1993) in a temporal period pertinent to local parading traditions in Northern Ireland and the LGBTQIA+ social movement (Drissel 2017).

While existing research reflects a 'metronormative' bias (Halberstam 2005) through its predominant focus on Belfast, recent years have seen new Prides enacted and adapted to smaller towns and 'rural' locations, echoing a wider global trend of Prides becoming 'hyper-localised' and 'hyper-contextualised' in Western societies (Ammaturo 2023).

Using a dramaturgical social movement framework (Benford & Hunt 1992), this research seeks to explore how Prides communicate meaning through four dramatic techniques (scripting, staging, performing, and interpreting), and how an analysis of these can enhance our understanding of Prides in changing spaces and places.

Adam McElhinney is a third-year PhD researcher in the School of Applied Social & Policy Sciences at Ulster University, supervised by Dr Volkan Yilmaz, Dr Claire Wright, and Dr Gail Neill. His ethnographic PhD study applies a dramaturgical social movement lens to explore the meaning-making practices of Pride parades in towns and cities across Northern Ireland in the mid-2020s.

Amy McKenzie, 'Where Is Scotland's National Theatre?'

Where Is Scotland's National Theatre? The creation of a national theatre without a traditional theatre building was innovative and liberating. 'Theatre without walls' offered a different proposition for what a national theatre could be. It did not need to be rooted to a single stage. It could be nimble, presenting work across Scotland and beyond. Twenty years on, I want to ask a deliberately simple question. Where is Scotland's National Theatre?

And, if a national theatre is everywhere, is it also nowhere? I'm a Scottish theatre maker, producer and early career researcher, and I recently worked at NTS for a year. A year I enjoyed, and one that challenged my perspective. Despite working for a theatre without walls, I went to the same place most days. Rockvilla. Not a theatre, but a building where theatre is made. A building that very much has walls. The point of 'theatre without walls', of course, is that the work leaves Rockvilla and happens elsewhere. But the organisation is not placeless. It has a base, staff, rehearsal rooms, and infrastructure. Where an organisation is based, where it presents theatre, and where it belongs are not necessarily the same thing. These questions sit alongside my PhD research with Stellar Quines Theatre Company, exploring its relocation from Edinburgh to Kirkcaldy. I want to put these very different organisations into conversation. One was created to make theatre across a nation without being tied to a permanent stage. The other has moved away from the capital and chosen to root itself somewhere specific. I'm still early in my research, so this will be a provocation, some creative out loud thinking about place and belonging. Where should a national theatre live? What does it mean for a theatre to belong to a place? And can a theatre designed to be everywhere ever really be rooted anywhere?

Amy McKenzie is a Glasgow-based theatre maker, producer and early career researcher. She was awarded a three-year University of the West of Scotland Vice-Chancellor's PhD Studentship in 2025. Her research, undertaken in partnership with Stellar Quines Theatre Company, explores the company's relocation from Edinburgh to Kirkcaldy and what this might reveal about place, leadership and cultural decentralisation in Scottish theatre. Amy previously worked as Assistant Producer (Artistic Development) at the National Theatre of Scotland and as Projects Producer at Playwrights' Studio, Scotland.

Marianna Szabó, 'Rewriting Scottish Stories Across Cultures: The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart from Scotland to Hungary'

David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* draws on Scottish literary and folkloric traditions, reinterpreting them in a contemporary setting. The play itself crosses several boundaries: between folklore and contemporary culture, academic knowledge and real-life experience, reality and the supernatural. However, stories can change, especially if they are told in a different cultural and historical context from the one in which they originate.

Relying on the original National Theatre of Scotland production (2011), this provocation focuses on the Hungarian adaptation, *Prudencia Hart különös kivetkezése*, staged at Stúdió K Theatre in Budapest (2024). It explores what happens to a national story when it crosses borders. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Scottish cultural and

folkloric elements, music, language, and the original theatrical setting are preserved, changed, or reinterpreted for a Hungarian audience. The comparison raises questions about the relationship between cultural translation, national storytelling, and cultural resilience. How much can a national story change when it crosses borders while still preserving its cultural origins?

Marianna Szabó recently completed her MA in English Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, where her research focused on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Scottish literature, the supernatural, unreliable narration, and the boundaries between reality and delusion in Scottish fiction. Her research has examined John Burnside's fiction, focusing on representations of death, time, and liminality. She is also interested in the changing representation of the Devil in Scottish literature across different historical periods, from earlier literary and folkloric traditions to contemporary reinterpretations, including David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*.

Katharina Wegerer, 'What moves Scottish Circus? Contemporary Circus, Civic Imagination and Democratic Life in Scotland'

Contemporary circus occupies an unusual position within Scotland's cultural landscape: seemingly ubiquitous throughout the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, for example, and increasingly visible across community arts programmes, outdoor performance and interdisciplinary theatre-making, it has long deserved greater attention in discussions of national culture, public discourse and democratic participation. What moves Scottish circus today, and what might it contribute to conversations about culture, democracy and the stateless nation?

Bringing together experiences of Scottish circus artists and practitioners, emerging insights from sector advocacy organisations, and contemporary scholarship, we may gather perspectives on the themes, concerns and aspirations currently shaping circus practice in Scotland. Looking at examples from indoor and outdoor circus, from big tops, walkabouts, cabarets and club stages, we can explore the artistic, social and political issues that practitioners seek to address; the structural challenges they face; and how circus operates within Scotland's wider theatre ecology and public discourse. What themes, tensions and opportunities emerge for the sector? How does circus contribute to civic imagination, public engagement and cultural participation? Might circus – often a 'democratic performance form' itself, present in public space and accessible across linguistic and cultural boundaries – perhaps be especially powerful in the quest for more inclusive and democratically engaged futures in Scotland?

Dr Katharina Wegerer is an early career researcher and educator, arts worker, amateur acrobat and circus enthusiast based in Edinburgh. She completed her PhD in English at the University of Dundee in 2025, following degrees in literature and culture from St Andrews and Vienna. Her interdisciplinary research explores grief, death, folklore and nature in contemporary British fiction, examining how stories and creative practice foster and shape public engagement with death and loss. More recently, she also began to investigate circus, literary engagement and adaptation to explore the political power of cultural participation, community storytelling and the many afterlives of text.

Visual Notes

Jenny Capon and Claire Stringer

Jenny Capon and Claire Stringer are artists that collaborate under the umbrella of More than Minutes. They are here to create Visual Minutes (also known as ‘Live Conference Illustration’, ‘Graphic Recording’, ‘Sketch Notes’, or ‘Scribing’). This is live illustration, a process of listening and capturing the key ideas, themes and messages as they happen—creating beautiful, dynamic visual records that record the heart of what's being said. For more information, please visit the website: <https://www.morethanminutes.co.uk>.