Glyn Maxwell: The Rhythm of Theatre

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Abstract: Glyn Maxwell has written and adapted over 25 plays in the last 30 years. He has also published some 10 poetry collections. His training in the two arts, under the aegis of Derek Walcott, has made him one of the masters of verse drama. This short introduction to Maxwell's oeuvre and to the translation of his 2014 *Best Man Speech* evinces the idea that, for him, poetic devices are dramatic devices in so far as they help create the voice, the rhythm, the breath of a character speaking – they are listening devices in the sense that they engage the audience.

Résumé : Glyn Maxwell a écrit et adapté plus de 25 pièces ces trente dernières années. Il a aussi publié une dizaine de recueils de poèmes. Sa formation dans les deux arts, sous l'égide de Derek Walcott, a fait de lui l'un des maîtres du théâtre en vers. Cette brève introduction à l'œuvre de Mawxell et à la traduction de son *Best Man Speech* (2014) souligne l'idée que, pour lui, les techniques poétiques sont des techniques théâtrales dans la mesure où elles aident à créer la voix, le rythme, le souffle d'un personnage qui parle – ce sont des dispositifs d'écoute dans le sens où elles impliquent l'audience.

Keywords: Glyn Maxwell, verse drama, voice, breath, translation

Mots-clés : Glyn Maxwell, théâtre en vers, voix, respiration, traduction

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse. And when he does not (as in a couple of novels and essays), he still writes about verse with the appreciation of an experienced wordsmith and the humour of a caring instructor. His novel *Drinks with Dead Poets*, published in 2016, is a series of twelve fantasy meetings between newly appointed Professor Maxwell, some

ten students who took a poetry class for mostly unpoetic reasons, and English and American poets from the 19th to the early 20th century you would find in any 21st century anthology (Keats, Dickinson, the Brontës… they even take a "field trip" to meet the First World War Poets). Except that these poets are here, in flesh and blood, very much alive in the diegesis and living up to their cultural reputations while telling some truths about their arts (Byron slams a version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" for instance). This unclassifiable piece of writing, which offers insight into Maxwell's own oeuvre, is a rather inventive sequel to his reader *On Poetry* (2012), meant for a general readership, in which he develops what we could term, after Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (1993), a "hauntological" poetics, an understanding of poetry as a site of cultural and aural memory that testifies to the presence of the past in contemporary forms. He strongly advises budding writers today to let themselves be haunted by poets and poems from the past: "A ghost takes shape in your room, it stills time as ghosts do, and, when it departs, with its soul and yours in eerie union, work has been done" (2012: 76). The whole essay is geared towards explaining why verse is not limited to the page but haunts the stage too.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, for the stage indeed. Apart from his 2019 *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*, all his stage productions (he has written and adapted well over 25 plays in the last 30 years, besides poetry collections, operas, and radio dramas) are in verse. Some of his plays are based on legends like *Wolfpit*, about two green children said to have appeared in Suffolk in the 12th century (1996, dir. Sally Moss, Edinburgh Fringe Festival); others on myths, like *The Black Remote*, a play adapting the figure of Pandora for young audiences and published in the National Theatre Connections Series (2016); others on historical characters, like his tragedy *The Lifeblood* (2004, dir. Guy Retallack, Edinburgh Fringe Festival), which is about the last days of Mary, Queen of Scots. Some of his plays are based on classical plays, like *After Troy* (2011, dir. Alex Clifton, Playhouse Theatre Oxford), a retelling of Euripides's *Women of Troy* and *Hecuba*, or *Lily Jones's Birthday* (2009, RADA), a satyr-play based on Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*;

others have moved from the page to the radio to the stage, like *The Gambler,* after Dostoevsky's novella (2016, dir. Karen Lordi-Kirkham, The Wild Project); others still have moved from stage to screen like his verse monologue, *The Best Man*, starring Danny Swanson (2004, dir. Jon Croker, Edinburgh). Some of his characters speak from beyond the grave, like his modern-day Orpheus and Eurydice in *The Forever Waltz* (2005, dir. Elysa Marden and Timothy Scott Harris, Workshop Theatre); others from the fringe of death, like *The Only Girl in the World* (2001, dir. Robert Horwell, Hoxton Hall) which features another pair of doomed lovers, Mary and Joe, set in the London of Jack the Ripper. A poet and a dramatist, Maxwell is also a sort of spectrograph, regularly commissioned to write anew our cultural icons, to allow the ghosts of the past to be heard on the contemporary stage.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, for many different types of theatre venues. In the early 1990s, he staged his first plays, fairy tales with a political agenda, in his parents' garden in Welwyn Garden City (2017a: 6) with parts taken up by relatives and friends (his mother, Buddug-Mair Powell had played in *Under Milk Wood* in 1957 on Broadway). Three of these large-cast plays were collected under the title *Gnyss the Magnificent* in 1993. His more mature plays were designed for institutional venues. For instance, *Liberty* (dir. Guy Retallack), which is about the French Revolution and based on Anatole France's novel *Les Dieux ont soif* (1912), premiered at Shakespeare's Globe in 2008, and then toured the UK at the Almeida, Arcola, RADA and Southwark Playhouse, before moving to New York. He also has a long-lasting collaboration with the Grosvenor Park Open-Air Theatre in Chester, an outdoor venue outside of London, which has scheduled many of his plays like *Merlin and the Woods of Time* (2011, dir. Alex Clifton), his rewriting of *Twelfth Night* as *Masters, Are you Mad?* (2012, dir. Robin Norton-Hale), his adaptation of *Cyrano De Bergerac* (2013, dir. Lucy Pitman-Wallace), and his adaptations of the children's novels *The Secret Seven* (2014, dir. Alex Clifton) and *Wind in the Willows* (2015, dir. Alex Clifton).

Glyn Maxwell writes verse, in spite of the terrible reputation it has for theatre-goers and theatre-critics. In his *Guardian* article entitled

"The Rhythm of Theatre", he writes: "Verse drama. There's an effective way to shed a thousand readers at a stroke. It's the one phrase I beg producers of my plays to omit from the publicity material". Indeed, he sides with those who doubt poets have anything to offer the stage, since he believes metaphors and obscurities run against story-telling, which should be at the heart of theatre practice for him. He claims that verse drama has a "unique burden to bear – the weight of the great ones and the almost total failure of everyone since…" (Mazzocchi Alemanni). He adds that it is almost impossible to lay the ghost of Shakespeare, a formidable story-teller, but that there is a lot to learn from him, especially the idea that verse on stage was no more natural in his time than it is today. This idea that Shakespeare "discovered, or invented, a 'natural' English metrics" (Blank 59) is debunked in Paula Blank's *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man* (2009). Still, metre is a symbolic order, a moral order, a literary order, one a poet should not do away with.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and that is actually what led him to write plays. In his early 20s, after publishing a few poems in national journals, he took a creative writing class on poetry and drama at Boston University with Derek Walcott, who became his friend and mentor (he even edited his *Selected Poems* in 2014). This simultaneous training in two disciplines has enabled him to create innovative work across genres. That is where he learnt to "scan that deep black space" (2005). He advises poets to "go and find a space and some actors. Test your verse on the lungs and throats and tongues and lips of creatures trained to know utterance from nonsense, trained in the best English written, trained a hundred times harder than you" (Mackenzie). Putting his verse in an actor's mouth is a way to "get away with inauthenticity" (Iyengar). What he is striving for is to "render persuasively the distinct voice of an actual breathing person", because, for him, the key element to "make a human sound (where human can be both adjective and noun, sound both noun and verb)" is "breath" (2005), which is etymologically connected to inspiration (2012: 22).

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and it taints his playscripts and stage work. He is self-labelled "the poet stuck in the chaos of theatre" (2012:

130). The techniques he uses combine devices that are central to both drama and poetry, like the shared, split, and stolen lines, or the direct address, or the way a deviation from regular metre will emphasize a change in the character's intention. Besides, his verse plays usually show no strict end-rhyme pattern but a subtle engineering of poetic sounds that include alliterations, assonances, internal rhymes… and what he calls "loose pentameters" (2005). His author's notes to *Plays One* and *Plays Two* read: "These plays are written in blank verse, so most of the lines are five-beat lines (or pentameters)" (9). Indeed the "ghost of a meter" lurking "behind the arras" (Eliot 34),[1] to take up T.S. Eliot's beautiful phrase, haunts most of the lines in his plays. He definitely writes within this Eliotic theatrical tradition, whose history he is well aware of. Indeed, he is very critical about the plays of the Romantic poets, because they were "comfy with tradition. It's why, for example, their verse-plays don't work. It's why T.S. Eliot, sharp thinker on tradition, eschewed the pentameter when he came to write his. Why I *uneschewed* it when I came to write mine" (2012: 286).

Glyn Maxwell writes verse, because he wants verse to sound just as natural as prose on stage. "All I can do is keep trying to show that verse on stage can make the sound we make now on the street, in the pub, in the bedroom, in Parliament. Ancient Greeks didn't talk in hexameters but if you master the line you can make anyone talk like it's today" (Mazzocchi Alemanni). In other words, he does not write to the metronome but gives form to the rhythm of everyday speech, so that all his characters speak "a demotic sort of pentameter" (DeStefano). They come to life because of the sounds they make on the page, and some of these characters are eloquent, others are so "deeply uneloquent and inarticulate" that "they become eloquent in their inarticulateness" (DeStefano), as in Beckett. The iambic pentameter, probably the most articulate medium there is, offers an ironic counterpoint to this search for inarticulacy.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and lines are part of the stage directions. The author's note to his *Plays 1* and *Plays 2* has five bullet points, three of which strictly focus on verse. The first one claims the variety of lines in the plays is due to the fact that they are "used for various

effects." The second one insists on the fact that the dramatic line is a poetic line - "These plays are composed of lines – not sentences or thoughts – and the lines should be kept intact." In other words, poetic diction has to be used throughout the dialogues. The last one reads –

> Words and lines and spaces come where they come for a reason, as in a musical score. There is nothing poetic about these plays aside from the one principle of their construction. They are written in verse not for reasons of aesthetics or culture of nostalgia, but because poets write in verse and a poet wrote these." (9)

This tongue-in-cheek statement that plays with tautology makes a strong case for verse on stage: it is a valid mode of expression for contemporary plays that deal with the way we speak and the way we live.

Best Man Speech, a few words

The title of Maxwell's *Best Man Speech* seems to say it all – this is a dramatic monologue uttered by Bailey, the Best Man, at his friend Addy's wedding to Miranda. We expect to be taken down memory lane, to be seized with laughter and tears, to disregard the groom's embarrassment if necessary, to hear an articulate speech that uses all the resources of rhetoric to convince us that the groom is not such a bad person, apart from a couple of forgivable mishaps or misdeeds. Research is rather sparse on wedding toasts – whereas How-To books are plenty – but it seems that the whole point of a best man speech is a rite of passage for the groom which will allow him to turn a new leaf with his bride, since his youthful years are turned into a story that is presented to the audience, a story the audience puts an end to by clapping. It is therefore also a communal act meant to strengthen the bond of the audience who are witnesses to this new beginning. In other words, this institutional speech act is in itself a writerly, theatrical, performative event. The metafictional dimension is emphasized in the playscript since at one point, Bailey imagines one member of the audience asking him "Who is this *Best Man*?" (*Plays 2*, 71). The italics are indicative of an ironic tone, but may also be read as a way for the playwright to interrogate the nature of the text he is writing. Indeed,

Maxwell uses several other devices to emphasize the metatheatrical dimension of his piece.

Bailey's speech abides by all the rules of the genre, or almost. The "tale of love, and cheating, with a sting, / a revelation, and a true confession…" (*Plays 2*, 72) begins with a mean girl / mean boy type of story but ends like a tragedy with the villain exposed for what he has done while the star-crossed lovers are parted forever. Bailey's insistent reminder that he is talking about love ("a tale of true romance for all you hardened / cynics in the room" (*Plays 2*, 74), "love romance, and the matters of the heart" (*Plays 2*, 75), "a love-chapter" (*Plays 2*, 77)…) is as ironical as can be, but it is also a great reminder that he is telling a story of redress – the words "tale" and "story" crop up repeatedly and create an opposition between those who have a story to tell, those who don't, and those whose story will never get told. What Bailey wants is to keep his audience "*un-entertained*" (*Plays 2*, 71, Maxwell's italics) i.e. alert, which also means that he rejects the idea that his best man speech is entertaining in the sense of escapist. To make sure everyone listens to his story, which is ultimately *his* story, Bailey highjacks the mic – he says "*I have the floor*" (*Plays 2*, 70, Maxwell's italics), in italics, as if the sentence was a stage direction intimating the audience to shush and listen. Most importantly, he has a black box, "the present" (*Plays 2*, 69) which he unwraps every so often:

> It's an easy listening device, did I say that?
> It's helping you to listen to my stories.
> I mean, we can't help making stories, can we? (*Plays 2*, 77)

Unwrapping the present, unveiling the truth, keeping the audience alert. The dramatic monologue is addressed both to the real audience in the theatre venue and to the fictional audience at the wedding reception through direct address and rhetorical questions. Indeed, because the fictional audience's expected reactions are embedded within the narrative, the real audience also become the witnesses and the recipients of this transformative speech and story. The speech is highly anecdotal, but its narrative is based on a quest pattern – a quest for information about the groom doubled with a quest for truth about his

dark side. It is steeped in humour and interspersed with puns. So much so that one of its characteristic features, namely the recurrent use of punchlines, may be evocative of stand-up comedy, an identifiable type of performance based on conversational speech with the audience. Paradoxically, the declamatory nature of the long monologue, which could be felt all the more declamatory as it is in verse, is undermined by the subtle play on rhythm, the many enjambments, which bring out the rhythms of natural speech:

> This is a Best Man speech. What, did you think
> it would be easy listening? (*Plays 2*, 74)

This is indeed poetry at this finest, since we are constantly required to listen, be it rhetorically (through the direct mode of address and the injunction to stay put), dramatically (to help him sustain his audience's attention, Bailey has a prop he calls "an easy-listening device", a present he slowly unwraps, and which may or may not be a bomb, which he promises, or threatens, to drop at any minute), or poetically (provided by the loose iambic pentameters he uses throughout his speech). Only by listening carefully do we see what happened since the story begins somewhere else at a time when Addy was significantly younger. The eye-witnesses to the wedding become ear-witnesses to a dark story of unrequited love, deception, and abuse.

The translation you are about to read therefore tries to highlight the phonocentrism of the play by converting the loose pentameters into loose alexandrines, or dodecasyllables more exactly, and by using variation in the line length to express the speaker's emotional states. In other words, the focus is on rhythmicity, not prosody, on the character's breath, and not on the metronome's tick-tock. Bailey's speech has all the marks of inarticulateness – apart from a couple of purple patches, the vocabulary is rather limited, the syntax is at times broken, tense sequencing sometimes lack consistence, parataxis and aposiopesis rule. And yet because that inarticulacy is framed in lines, Bailey's speech gains in eloquence. This does not translate easily into French, hence the choice of transposing the inarticulacy onto the register. The translators hope that this dark narrative will take your breath away in

French as it did to them in English. Do not hold your breath anymore and turn the page for the best man speech.

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1 Note that Eliot’s comment was prescriptive (“the ghost of a meter should lurk behind the arras”), but that it has been built into a descriptive argument by Annie Finch in *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (2000).