The people still don't own the Land: An interview with director Joe Douglas on rebooting *The Cheviot*

Dominic Chamayou-Douglas (Université de Lille and University of Kent)

Abstract: The original 1973 production of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* by 7:84 Scotland was a landmark production in Scottish theatre-making, combining formal inventiveness, local history, socialist politics and community engagement. The popular and critical success of the piece established a working model which 7:84 adopted in subsequent productions as well as inspiring multiple socially engaged theatre companies throughout Britain. The play's theme of long-term subjugation to foreign investment and power reinforced the arguments of the nascent Scottish nationalist movement who sought to co-opt the play into a wider political discourse.

In 2019, the National Theatre of Scotland reproduced the show with an updated version which toured established urban theatre venues throughout the country. Being the first production of the play in over forty years, significant popular, cultural and political interest accompanied the presentation of a work which had, in the intervening years, become a theatrical touchstone. In the wake of increased engagement with the independence debate, the play again highlighted the contested ownership of the country's land and natural resources.

This article compares the two productions of *The Cheviot* by analysing the aesthetic choices, textual updates and political message of the 2019 reboot. Featuring original interview material with the play's director Joe Douglas, the article highlights the challenges of adapting a piece whose style, politics and production history were firmly rooted in the social-economy of 1970s Britain and the difficulty in remaining faithful to original material while making work appropriate to contemporary sensibilities and expectations. The scaled down version of the piece, prepared for an unfulfilled tour of small venues in the Highlands much like the original 1973 production, is also discussed.

Résumé : La création de *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* en 1973 par la compagnie 7:84 Scotland a fait date dans l'histoire du théâtre écossais, alliant inventivité formelle, histoire locale, politique socialiste et engagement communautaire. Le succès populaire et critique de la pièce a établi un modèle de travail que 7:84 a adopté dans ses productions ultérieures et qui a inspiré de nombreuses compagnies théâtrales politiquement engagées dans toute la Grande-Bretagne. Le thème de la pièce, l'assujettissement à long terme aux investissements et au pouvoir étrangers, a renforcé les arguments du mouvement nationaliste écossais naissant, qui a cherché à coopter la pièce pour l'intégrer à un discours politique plus large.

En 2019, le National Theatre of Scotland a reproduit le spectacle dans une version actualisée qui a fait le tour des théâtres urbains établis dans tout le pays. Comme il s'agissait de la première production de la pièce depuis plus de quarante ans, un intérêt populaire, culturel et politique important a accompagné la présentation d'une œuvre qui, depuis lors, est devenue une référence incontournable. Dans le contexte d'un engagement accru dans le débat sur l'indépendance, la pièce a de nouveau mis en lumière le contrôle contesté des terres et des ressources naturelles du pays.

Cet article compare les deux productions de *The Cheviot* en analysant les choix esthétiques, les mises à jour textuelles et le message politique de la reprise de 2019. S'appuyant sur des entretiens inédits avec le metteur en scène Joe Douglas, l'article met en lumière les défis posés par l'adaptation d'une pièce dont le style, la politique et l'histoire de la production sont fermement ancrés dans l'économie sociale des années 1970 au Royaume-Uni, ainsi que la difficulté de rester fidèle au matériau d'origine tout en adaptant le travail aux sensibilités et aux attentes contemporaines. La version réduite de la pièce, préparée pour une tournée dans de petites salles des Highlands, tout comme la production originale de 1973, est également abordée.

Keywords: John McGrath; *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*; interview; Scottish Theatre; political theatre; socialist theatre; reboot

Mots clés : John McGrath ; *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* ; entretien ; théâtre écossaise ; théâtre engagé ; théâtre socialiste ; reprise

John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

In the history of Scottish theatre, John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* holds a singular, rarefied place. The impact of the original production on the theatrical landscape cannot be underestimated, with the words "legendary" and "mythical" often being used to describe society's collective memory of the first tour around the Highlands of Scotland in 1973 (Nelson 1; Mackenney 352; DiCenzo 152). The success of the play launched the newly formed 7:84 (Scotland) theatre company, established McGrath as a key voice in popular-socialist playwrighting and set a template for touring work in Scotland which explicitly sought to reflect the concerns of ordinary people. Perhaps more importantly the work appeared to touch a chord with audiences in remote areas of the country, sought to highlight local people's history and called attention to the often-neglected Scottish Gaelic culture and language (Mackenney 360). Known simply as *The Cheviot,* this abbreviation became a byword for socially engaged, genuinely Scottish theatre and a symbol for what theatre could hope, and perhaps should aim, to achieve.

How then is one to attempt a reboot of this theatrical touchstone for the 21st century considering the accumulated cultural weight of the work? The question is fraught with the usual artistic and practical choices involved in mounting any play with the additional issues of widespread public investment in the artwork's meaning and value, and a sense of common ownership felt by many, some with only slight connections to the original production. In the intervening years, the play and original tour had established an aura that could have dis-

couraged theatre makers from endeavouring to adapt the work for a contemporary audience, the risk of sullying the memory and upsetting still living original cast members too great. In addition, the play was developed in the politically charged period of the early 1970s when left-wing ideas, socialist movements and the challenging of cultural norms were highly prevalent in the UK, both onstage and in society more generally (Leach 224). Contemporaries of McGrath, such as David Hare and David Edgar, were advancing left-wing concepts on English stages, while agitprop theatre could be seen in the work of companies like Red Ladder, CAST and Portable Theatre (Kershaw 166). The original *Cheviot* production therefore dovetailed with a British movement of socialist theatre which sought to educate, challenge and inspire audiences to agitate for widescale social change.

The challenges facing Joe Douglas in remounting the work in September 2015 at the Dundee Repertory Theatre were thus diverse and multifaceted. Since the original tour in 1973, the only other production not headed up by John McGrath occurred in 1993 and involved many of the initial cast. Douglas was therefore the first director to remake *The Cheviot* with an entirely new team, unconnected to the original creators. For a relatively inexperienced director, the stakes were high in terms of the scale of the production as well as the level of expectation, especially in the wake of the Scottish Independence referendum which occurred in June 2014. The ensuing critical and commercial success of the reboot were far from predictable, while the subsequent tours of the work, in 2016 and 2019 in slightly altered form, allowed the play to be seen more widely by a new generation of theatre goers, at times in venues and settings similar to those in which the original 1973 production were first experienced. This article features an extended interview with Joe Douglas that seeks to track the production from inception to stage as well as exploring the reaction of audiences, critics and former cast members. The semi-structured interview is used as a methodological tool for gathering primary evidence on the practicalities and the process of creating the reboot as well as to access insight from the play's director on the wider cultural and social significance of the work.

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil broadly recounts a history of the Highlands of Scotland from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries in three parts by focussing on the economic use of the land and the consequences for the people living there. Beginning with agriculture, the play describes how often absentee landowners forcibly removed people from the land in order to make space for the cheviot, a highly profitable breed of sheep. During the Highland Clearances, entire villages were emptied and at times destroyed with villagers migrating to British colonies or relocating to purpose-built settlements on the coast without access to farmland. The second section of the play focuses on the nineteenth century, a period in which the land was often repurposed for the hunting of stag, deer and game bird while the clearing of the land of crofters continued with many men joining the British army to fight in the Empire. The final section describes the transfer of control of the land from the aristocracy to domestic and foreign corporations in order to exploit new industries in mining, fishing, farming and especially oil, only discovered in Scottish coastal waters in the 1960s. The narrative emphasises how both ownership and control of the Scottish Highlands has always rested in the hands of a wealthy elite who, being culturally, socially and often physically unconnected to the area, have managed the land in their own economic self-interest often at the expense of and in direct opposition to the interests of the local population.

The play is based on the format of a *ceilidh:* a social gathering traditional to the Highlands in which Gaelic music, song and dance are an integral part, but which also serves to unite disparate agricultural communities for discussion, poetry and storytelling in a celebration of common cultural heritage. *The Cheviot* celebrates Gaelic culture, incorporating many traditional ballads and adapting well-known melodies to create new songs in a mixture of English, Gaelic and Scots. The tone is often light-hearted and ironic, the humour abundant and unambiguous, with many skits and short sketches of historical or believable figures drawn with broad characterisation, consciously following a form common in Scottish popular theatre and recognisable in pantomime, revues and cabaret (Brown and Innes 205). The text consciously incor-

porates considerable historical information, using direct address and forthright exposition to convey evidence to the audience in a mode associated with agitprop theatre. Although the lineage of elements in the work may be seen in various theatrical forms, the combination of political messaging, cultural narrative, historical fact and multilingual music is somewhat unique to *The Cheviot* and was an original proposition when first performed. The initial tour of the Highlands was ecstatically received by the local population. Mainly playing in village halls and social clubs, the band in the play would transform into an actual *ceilidh* band after the show, playing long into the night and emphasising the wider social purpose of 7:84's work beyond the stage (Hamilton and Scullion 61). The adventure of touring to remote, rural and beautiful parts of Scotland added to the mystique for all theatre companies who hoped to follow in their footsteps.

Interview with director Joe Douglas

This interview was conducted on 19th October 2023. The text has been edited for reasons of coherence and clarity and approved by Joe Douglas.

DOMINIC CHAMAYOU-DOUGLAS: *Where did you first hear about* The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil *and what were your initial impressions of the work?*

JOE DOUGLAS: I think I first heard about it at drama school. We had a teacher from Glasgow who was a director and lecturer in cultural theory who mentioned it in passing. I remember reading Howard Brenton, David Hare and Joan Littlewood and had a bit of an understanding of political theatre but more agitprop work. It was only when I moved to Scotland when I was selected as a trainee director for the National Theatre of Scotland that I became much more aware of it. So many conversations when you talk about Scottish theatre refer to that play, to 7:84's work and the cultural impact and aspirations they

had. They offered a theatre culture to a popular audience and to people in Scotland who were in general quite solidly left-wing amongst the working class and who wanted to see their own lives reflected on their stages. I'm not sure I'd ever read it in great detail until the independence referendum in 2014 but in the weeks after I returned to *The Cheviot* and I realised that it was really vibrant. I thought I knew a way of doing it that would make it resonate with a modern audience through what it said about Scotland's place politically, particularly in relation to socialism and nationalism.

DCD: *So it was primarily the Scottish Independence referendum in September 2014 which brought the idea of remounting* The Cheviot *to your mind and made you think that "this is the moment" for the play?*

JD: It encouraged me to return to it politically as, though it's not overtly necessarily a nationalistic text, there are absolute resonances within it about who owns the people's story and who is responsible for your future. I think it's partly a generational thing. The people who I was assisting at the time, like John Tiffany, would have known John McGrath and were probably around when it was revived in the early 90s. They were a generation that came of age in New Labour and that's very much a time when agitprop hard left theatre was not very trendy and not very cool. There was a sense that it's old hat. I think the play is probably dated now, but after the referendum and also given the state of society, due to the austerity policies of the Cameron government and the horrible effect they were having on our society, I felt that a simple clarion call had a place on our stage.

DCD: *What were some of the hurdles in the preparation process for the piece? How was the reaction when you said you wanted to remount such a well-known text, not just from people you were hoping to work with, but also from other people in Scottish theatre?*

JD: I was going through quite a close collaborative process with the estate. It began with Elizabeth McClellan, who was an original company member and the widow of John McGrath. I'd been given permission to do the play and I had two very long conversations on the phone with her. She was basically sounding me out more for my politics. She wanted to make sure it was coming from an authentic place as well as to check my level of expertise and experience, that she felt she could trust me with this play. Then I visited her once in the spring before where I was able to have a really good conversation with her in detail about it and then she died just before we went into rehearsals. Her funeral was literally the day before we started rehearsing.

In the prep period I got a great big map of Scotland because there's so many references to these places in the Highlands, many of which I tried to visit ahead of time. I took a trip up to Fortrose on the Black Isle and went around visiting a lot of the sites of the Clearances and got my bearings. I went to the museum at Betty Hill, which is right at the top of Sutherland, and saw the pulpit which I think is the pulpit that the preacher scene was based on that appears in *The Cheviot.*

I didn't engage that much with people in the run up, I was too anxious to be honest but there was a real excitement about it, about just being able to see it and that's why I wanted to do it – to see it. Myself and Jemima Levick, who was the artistic director of the Dundee Rep, had an inkling it would have a big audience and people would really come out for it but I think the impact it made that first time we did it in 2015 exceeded our expectations in terms of how it seemed to touch a nerve among audiences. Subsequently talking to playwright Douglas Maxwell, I remember him saying "I just thought it was going to be terrible."

DCD: *Once you got the green light for the production to take place, what was the initial starting point for reimagining this new version?*

JD: Your first decision as a director often is "What's it gonna look like?". There's such an iconic design associated with that original production, with John Byrne's pop-up book. I am one of those directors whose first instinct is usually to put lines through most of the stage directions and interrogate the play, what it is, the text. I was a bit anxious about taking it on culturally and in terms of the scale of the production, so I turned to Graham McLaren who was a more experienced director than me. He would often design his own work and design for other people and he was like "oh I hate the play but I like you. There are much better McGrath plays that you should direct but because I don't want to direct it, I'll help you out."

The show is a *ceilidh*, so we decided to take out the front seats and floor the whole theatre in reclaimed wood to make it a village hall with big light fixtures hanging down to kind of bring the space in a bit, make it feel homely, all second-hand, all found objects that have all got a history of their own. The audience sat at the tables on the stage and there was a space in the middle which is where the *ceilidh* and the show took place. I remember Graham saying he needed one big intervention in terms of his design, and it needed to be Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen*[1]. He blew it right up, so a deer just filled the backstage of Dundee Rep Theatre and that was the backdrop on which we played – this Victorian image of Scotland, an image which is still playing out today across much of Scotland in terms of the power structures in place.

DCD: *During the initial development process you focused primarily on the design elements so at what point did you look at script changes?*

JD: Me and Graham, we kind of went through the script together. We watched the film[2] together and saw what John McGraw had done differently in the film to his book. The film actually spills out and becomes a documentary at the end, the whole section on the oil industry in Aberdeen bears no resemblance to the actual play script as published.

Then I spent a period of maybe six weeks playing with the structure of the text and taking it apart and I thought that I'd made a structure that read better and worked better. I was talking to Elizabeth initially and then with Luke Holbrook, who was working for Casarotto Ramsey, on the dramaturgy. He read what I'd done and said "Yeah, great. But it's not the play. So you need to do the play." And I was like, "OK, you're right. I do need to do the play." But it was a helpful process for me. Some things I still wanted to change and then I had to work closely with Luke.

DCD: *What was the nature of the alterations that you made to the text? Did you have a particular approach when looking at the play as a whole piece?*

JD: Just make it relevant for a contemporary audience. Are people going to understand it? Is it going to speak to people? Is it truthful? It was often about cultural context and frames of reference. For example, Edward Heath is mentioned as a contemporary politician who everyone in the audience would have known as the Prime Minister. In Dundee in 2015, who in the audience is going to know who that is, that he was a conservative and that he was seen as quite aloof and hostile to union activity?

There were many cultural tropes and elements to update in terms of political correctness. You don't want the audience to be focusing on something incidental when actually they need to be listening to a political point. For example, there was a portrayal of Native Americans and in the 1970s, probably even in the early 90s production, I imagine it was just seen as a little comedic interlude that no one gave a thought about. There's a call and response in what's called "The Sturdy Highlander" scene where the audience are encouraged to shout "Walla Walla Wooskie" then some "Red Indians" come on stage with Tomahawks raised and attack the sturdy Highlander. It felt like it had racialized undertones, so I offered to change it to a more pantomimic call and response, "it's behind you", which is in effect the game that

was being played on the stage. It wasn't working theatrically in a way that was satisfying, that didn't feel like it was potentially offensive and problematic to an audience. So then the cut spoke for itself.

Don't get me wrong, it has a political point to it. McGrath's talking about the cycle of violence and colonial violence that was perpetrated on different sides between different oppressed peoples, both the cleared communities who had been sent to Canada, Nova Scotia and to the local native population. I remember Kate (McGrath) saying that her dad wasn't politically correct, and he did enjoy challenging some of those levels of comfort usually preserved for the middle-class audience. But you've potentially got all these audience members distracted by questioning your representation of a Native American on stage.

In "We are the men who own your Glen", I was conscious that not everyone knew that David Cameron, who was the Prime Minister during the first production in 2015, would go on holiday to the Isle of Jura, most of which was owned by his father-in-law, and shoot stags during the summer. We gave John Macauley a face of David Cameron and I can't remember why but he was running around with his top off with David Cameron's face on wearing Union Jack boxer shorts and waving these flags, doing some Morris dancing and it was just so ridiculous. Then during the run of the show the story emerged about David Cameron having sex with a pig so John went out of his own volition one day and bought a stuffed pig and took it onstage with him that night and of course got an absolute roar of laughter.

When we took it to Aberdeen, we projected the words "Make Balmedie Great Again" because Trump was already starting his MAGA rhetoric and Balmedie is the Site of Special Scientific Interest that he purchased and then bulldozed to make his golf course and the roar that went up from the audience in Aberdeen when they saw that was like nothing I'd ever heard to be honest because it was just such a sense of recognition.

DCD: *In the production I saw at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh in 2016, as had happened with the film of* The Cheviot*, the final section on the oil industry was significantly updated to take the story through to the present day.*

JD: We both shortened it and extended it so if you read the original text, there are reams of references to oil companies and landowners, many of whom had changed hands or had mergers. What it ultimately became was a sense of the potential of other things like renewable energy. Many of the wind farms that are being built, some of them are community-owned but increasingly less and less communities get anything or very small fractions of support from these developments. It was a way of rounding off the energy journey.

A former Labour MP got quite angry with me after a performance he came to see in Dundee as he thought I had hijacked the narrative to suit a nationalist agenda, particularly with this new bit. I thought it was unfair but he was really angry as he felt very close to the play and was a personal friend of John McGrath. I did subsequently update it and maybe ameliorated it. Like any new work if something doesn't feel like it's landing right, then you adapt it. Not everyone does that but I think you should never feel like it's ever finished.

DCD: *In what ways did you try to maintain continuity between the past performances and this production? Did you talk to anyone from the older shows? Also, I suppose conversely, were there any moments when you tried to stamp your own identity on to your production?*

JD: I had spoken to Elizabeth MacLellan when she was alive and John Bett who had directed the revival in the 90s and I spoke to others who came in to visit the show once it was on. The ownership of that production is an issue because it's so iconic. It's like being in a band in a way, everyone's like, "who's who?", "who owns the narrative?"

Ultimately, it's John McGrath's play. There was a collaborative approach to the creative process but he was the writer.

I was very keen not to open our process to any other influences from the original production because you're trying to make it live for a new audience and that felt it'd be unhelpful to be honest, because they're not going to be objective. The approach had to feel our own. We had to empower the actors who also felt the cultural weight of it because that play hung over Scottish theatre. It was a weird exorcism that I wanted to perform which was to stop everyone comparing everything to *The Cheviot* because it's just another play and I felt like I wanted to lift that hoodoo a bit. We were a new generation of artists. The revival in the 90s was also done by people who were involved with it in the 70s, whereas this was a whole bunch of new people coming to it afresh.

But I was really keen to pay homage to them, so there were seven tables on stage and every table we named after a member of the original company so the audience would say "I'm sitting at John's table", for example. That's like a little Easter egg. But I consciously wanted to increase the amount that women had to do in the show and so I repurposed the MC role, mostly to Irene McDougal, who is a stalwart of the Dundee Rep ensemble. I was really aware that this is an ensemble play and I was taking it to a theatre that has a culture of ensemble theatre making.

Jo Freer, who played the Andy McChuckemup character (played by Bill Paterson in the original production), we made sure he had quite long dark hair with a moustache like Bill Patterson had so people who are familiar with the play would see the reference. I do remember on the first night looking along the row to see Johnny Bett digging Bill Patterson in the ribs and being like "look that's you".

DCD: *How did you deal with the linguistic challenges as Gaelic is at the heart of the story and the ethos of the play?*

JD: For the Gaelic we needed to find a native speaker to be in the company. In the 70s they had Dolina McLennan who was so iconic as a singer and a performer in Gaelic culture and if I got another female Gaelic singer, whoever played that part in our production would feel like they're doing a direct comparison, so I wanted to change that up. We all learnt some Gaelic in rehearsals so that it wasn't just the preserve of the native Gaelic speaker to hold that but something that we all shared within the company, especially as it's now an official language of Scotland. It doesn't hold much intrinsic commercial value but it's not actively oppressed in the way that it was when people were discouraged from speaking it. I wanted to make the audience aware of their lack of Gaelic rather than just treating it as an aesthetic aspect of the production, so we added a bit where, in Gaelic, Callum McGregor would call out "does anybody here speak Gaelic?" At pretty much every show there was another Gaelic speaker and then they would have a short conversation. There was this moment that was just for them in a way, a live moment. It's a play that only really works with an audience. A bit like rehearsing a pantomime, you can only half rehearse it, you need an audience to create it. There's a ritualistic aspect to that show about the audience needing to be there.

DCD: *In terms of the first run at the Dundee Rep, was it smooth sailing from beginning or was it still developing because as you said you're creating it live with the audience?*

JD: The show should never feel smooth. It's quite a rough show, you're playing with rough theatre. I wanted it to have that authenticity of maybe not quite being finished. This is a show about land, about who owns the land. There was a bit towards the end of the play which becomes a bit of an anthem. It reiterates all these themes and facts about land that has been purchased. In the smaller scale version, we did it in a more percussive way but in these large-scale spaces, I thought there could be something interesting, especially

in the aftermath of the referendum, in allowing the audience the chance to come on stage and to say a line and to own that space for a little bit. What that was doing, philosophically as a show, was trying to empower and enable and encourage the audience to push themselves out of their comfort zone. And to see if people had been moved, to see if they could hold the space. And every night people did, loads of people did.

DCD: *Do you think it will be revived again, either your version or can you imagine that it will be taken up by another generation after you in 10- or 20-years' time? Can you still see it having that relevance?*

JD: I don't know. I hope not. I was always like, "perform this play until you don't have to because hopefully the politics change." It's that funny thing, you're trying to perform it out of existence, as if it's not relevant then it means that conditions have changed to the point where society feels it doesn't need to see this anymore and it becomes history.

The land movement is very interesting even since we performed it. The community land movement has grown a lot in Scotland, and there's that phrase in the play that people must own the land. It's becoming, bit by bit, more real and now some of these communities are surviving and thriving very often because they've been able to buy land and have more autonomy over the decisions that affect them. You have communities now in the Outer Hebrides who are the housing developers. It's not the Council and it's not at the behest of a landowner.

If the play is saying something about Scottishness maybe you might put it on again, but what even is that? But it does go to the heart of a debate about fairness in Scotland. That, I think, will probably continue to be relevant for a long time. But there are other works of John McGrath that I think also do that and there are other plays and new works that will be made that will do that better.

Commentary on the interview

The interview highlights the various obstacles facing this *Cheviot* reboot and how Douglas and the production team sought to overcome these cultural, practical, historical and artistic challenges. When attempting to reimagine a play with such cultural heritage, there exists a need to refer to the lineage of the piece to allow for connections to be drawn down through the decades. The play itself carefully emphasises the importance of passing stories and culture down through the generations and presents a sweeping narrative spanning hundreds of years to enable links to be traced between disparate events, separated by time and geography, but connected through the themes of land use, capitalist oppression and cultural heritage. The 2015 production of *The Cheviot* achieved this by consciously referencing the original 1973 production by naming tables after the original cast members, by designing a set that imitated the village halls of the original Highland tour and by dressing up cast members to resemble original cast members. Additionally, the quasi-vetting process that Douglas experienced at the hands of Elizabeth MacLennan before being allowed to adapt the play, symbolically represents the passing on of the play, and also the causes for which the play advocates, to a new generation. This handover of the right to perform the play from artist to artist parallels the bequeathing of stories, poems and songs between different generations in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, a necessary act in preserving Gaelic knowledge and traditions for what is primarily an oral culture. Any revival of a play will likely engender comparisons with past productions but in this case the history of the play was an ever-present element of the creative environment. The creative team therefore actively acknowledged and venerated the past rather than seeking to lessen or ignore its significance.

Despite the necessity of recognising the play's specific heritage, the reboot sought to update and renew the show for the 21st century with a focus on making a piece appropriate for the moment of performance in 2015. The production made considerable alterations to the text, entirely repurposing the third section concerning oil. In 1973, the

oilfields of Scotland were only beginning to be exploited, the play then predicted how the petroleum industry, allied with industrial capital and the British government, might develop this newfound source of wealth under the North Sea. In 2015 the history of this exploitation could be presented with evidence rather than relying on the projected imaginations of McGrath. Douglas thus sought to reignite a long-running debate concerning the profits of the oil industry benefitting the whole of the UK, rather than Scotland as a country despite the natural resources resting entirely within "Scottish" waters. The updates highlighted the actions of successive Westminster governments and their reluctance to establish a national oil company through a negative comparison with the wealth of the Norwegian oil fund while also noting the links of many senior Conservative politicians to the oil industry. A further textual addition concerned the resetting of the border between England and Scotland in 1999 immediately before Scottish devolution which ensured multiple oilfields thus fell within English waters rather than Scottish (McGrath 2015).

When I saw the production in 2016 at the Lyceum in Edinburgh, I perceived a shift in the mood of the audience at this revelation. The tension in the room seemed to heighten as a recent politically sensitive decision with an unequivocal link to Scottish independence was presented and the motives behind these actions openly questioned by the performers. Up until this section of the play, the action occurs firmly in the past. Although many of the events represented are based on fact with the consequences enduring to this day, the piece can be perceived as a historical play, allowing the audience to remain at an emotional distance from the content. By updating the text to include contemporary events which have an undeniable impact on people's present-day lives, the theme of oppression of the people from capitalist, often non-Scottish, forces was also brought into the present day as a current issue rather than an unfortunate element of the past. In the wake of the Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit vote, two politically charged and divisive issues, the airing of political grievances in a direct and honest manner transformed the piece from

a potential relic with only metaphorical relevance to the 21st century into an engaged piece of contemporary political theatre.

Douglas refers to an interaction with an audience member who questioned the revision of the narrative thrust of the piece to support a nationalist agenda, a criticism also levelled at the revival in the press (Dickie). The alterations to the text were more overtly critical of Westminster governments, that is to say English-controlled governments. The reboots were certainly inviting the audience to see the play's narrative as a long history of Scottish subjugation ideally one day leading to independence. However, ever since the play was first performed in 1973, the message has regularly been interpreted as supportive of Scottish independence with the initial workshopped version of the play presented at a Scottish National Party conference entitled "What Kind of Scotland?" and 7:84 returning to perform the full version two years later at the SNP conference in 1974 (McDonald 214). Even today, the play is spoken of as supporting Scottish independence by original cast members and more widely in the press (Hassan). This despite the repeated disavowals of John McGrath of the nationalist argument who insisted that the play first and foremost presented a socialist vision of Scottish history and that nationalism without a rejection of capitalism would never bring about the changes in land ownership that the piece supports (Mackenney 360). It may therefore be argued that Douglas was utilising the contradiction inherent within the play that a socialist reappraisal of the question of landownership is intimately connected to the issue of independence and a binary separation of the two unrealistic. By conflating the two concerns, the revival continued an established element of the play's performance history.

Conclusion

Reviving plays from any period or genre is far from a formulaic process. *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is no different in the essential necessity to reimagine the staging, the visual and audial aspects, and the textual interpretation. However, the emblematic

nature of the play in Scottish theatre, the investment of audiences and professionals in the work's wider meaning, and the topicality of the references compelled a profound reworking of the text alongside an engagement with the wider cultural and historical significance of McGrath's play. The play's structure and audience-orientated nature obliges any prospective director to update the text to ensure the play continues to communicate the fundamental themes of the work and "speak to" the audiences of the day. An intentional ephemerality is embedded in the essence of the play as the material context continues to evolve with time requiring the play to evolve in parallel.

The overall success of Joe Douglas' 2014 reboot of *The Cheviot* is attested to by the commercial success and the numerous positive reviews for the initial revival and the subsequent tours (Billington; Pollock; The Newsroom; Dibdin). I witnessed the enthusiastic standing ovation given to the 2016 production at the Lyceum in Edinburgh. Reviewers critiqued the combining of nationalist and socialist sentiment and the didactic nature of the material, but the overall tone of the coverage was overwhelmingly positive. Although the play may be castigated as outmoded, while the issues of land ownership, wealth inequality and natural resource exploitation remain as politically relevant as they were in 1973, the continued importance of *The Cheviot* to Scottish playwrighting will remain as elevated as ever.

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1 *The Monarch of the Glen* (1851) by Edwin Landseer is an oil-on-canvas painting of a red deer stag later used extensively by various companies to advertise Scottish products eventually becoming a cliche in its representation of Scotland. The original currently hangs in the Scottish National Gallery.

2 The film version of the play was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast as a Play for Today in 1974. Written by John MeGrath and directed by John Mackenzie, the film featured the original cast and mixed documentary footage, a filmed performance of the play and scenes filmed on location.