

The Traverse at 50

Edinburgh's bastion of new writing, the **Traverse Theatre**, clocks up 50 years of boundary-pushing theatre this year. Jo Caird unpicks the secret to its success.



"Edinburgh was intolerable. One could not stand the thought of Edinburgh without the festival." Richard Demarco, one of the original founders of the Traverse Theatre, does not mince his words. In January 1963, the Traverse Theatre Club opened in the tiny basement of the Paperback Bookshop on Lawnmarket. The space was first used as a venue during the festival the previous summer. Those involved in what was known as The Sphinx Club in August 1963, "wished to keep the spirit of the festival all year round," says the 83-year-old arts impresario. But that's not all. The Traverse, says Demarco, without a hint of irony in his voice, "was founded to be one of the world's greatest theatres".

Half a century has passed since Demarco and the other founders—actor John Malcolm; director Terry Lane; Jim Haynes, who ran the Paperback Bookshop; and Tom Mitchell, who owned the building—set those wheels in motion. Lots has changed in the intervening years, but the Traverse

is still going strong, arguably the most respected venue at the Edinburgh Fringe and one of the UK's top theatres when it comes to new work.

So what's the secret of its continued success? "If we knew that we would bottle it and sell it!" says Orla O'Loughlin, who took over as artistic director of the Traverse from Dominic Hill in January 2012. Central to the theatre's philosophy for a long time now, she says, has been "nurturing people at the start of their careers". There are plenty of examples of where this early support has paid off: such names as David Greig, David Harrower and Liz Lochhead were all commissioned by the Traverse at the beginning of their writing lives.

It was the debut of another Scottish writer, however, that first properly brought the work of the Traverse to the attention of O'Loughlin. The director saw Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way* at the National Theatre in autumn 2001, a transfer following the play's triumphant run at the Fringe that August. She had been aware of the theatre

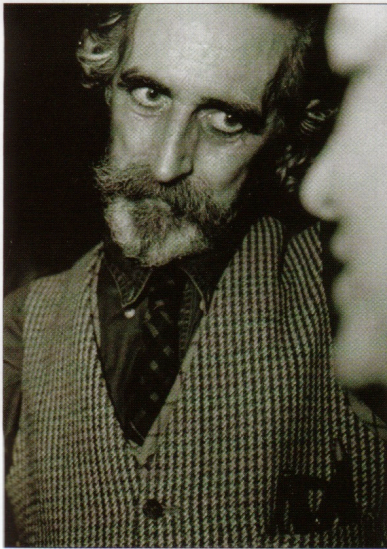


Top:
Traverse at 50

Above:
Jim Haynes

before that point, of course, having taken work to the festival as a student, but it was "seeing that brilliant, euphoric, terrifying piece of writing and then tracing its genesis back to the Traverse" that opened her eyes to the magic being worked there.

Burke went on to have another huge success at the Traverse with *Black Watch*.



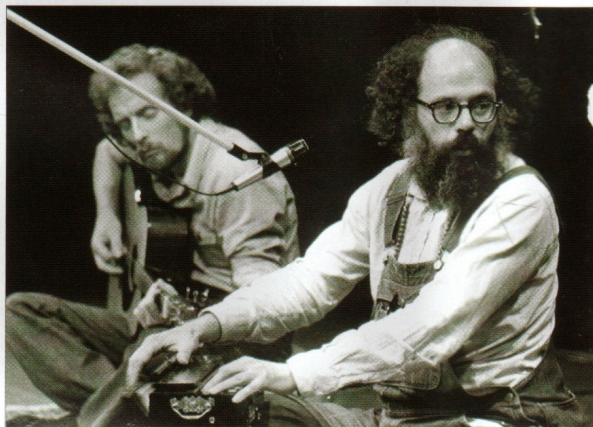
which played at the Barbican and toured the UK and the world since its premiere at the 2006 Fringe. *Black Watch* saw Burke reunited with the director of *Gagarin Way*, John Tiffany, who was associate director at the Traverse when Burke sent the theatre his first script. Burke is unequivocal about the impact the Traverse has had on his career. "If it wasn't for the Traverse and the people in it at the time, I wouldn't be a writer."

Black Watch is perhaps the biggest hit in the theatre's recent history, but there have been plenty of other major successes over the years. Too many to even recall, in fact, says Renny Robertson, the theatre's chief electrician, who has been there since 1993 and has "worked on pretty much every festival show". *Moscow Stations*, which played during the 1993 Fringe and transferred to the West End, stands out in his memory.

"Tom Courtenay gave an absolutely masterful performance in a one-man show. You can see something like that for weeks on end—every day—and not be bored, not have any bits of the show that you drift away from. That's the test. It's a very unusual thing."

By no means, however, have the Traverse's productions always been positively received. Gordon McDougall, artistic director from 1966 to 1968, recalls that the early years in particular were fraught with scandal. A play called *Futz* by the New York company La Mama earned itself the Daily Express headline 'Filth on the Fringe' when it played at the 1967 festival, while a University of Edinburgh production called *Mass in F* was cancelled after one performance that same August. Both involved simulated sex on stage, the former with animals.

"[The Traverse] started off being highly controversial," says McDougall. "There was the tension between the new and theoretic-



The Traverse at 50

Summerhall, various dates throughout August, free

Top left:
John Byrne

Top right:
Cora Bissett and
Matthew Pidgeon
in David Greig's
Midsummer

Above:
Simon Callow & Jim
Haynes

cally challenging and sexually explicit work that was being done in this tiny theatre in this extremely conservative town."

The theatre is still presenting work that shocks and challenges Fringe audiences—just think of the stir caused by Tim Crouch's *The Author* in 2009—but gone is the rough and ready vibe of days gone by. "[During the Fringe] there's something about our spaces that demands a polish and a finish and a finesse, I think. And a real rigour," says its current artistic director. "We're not a place where brand new artists come to try out their craft."

It's something the theatre is beginning to address. This year's Fringe programme includes classic Traverse fare like David Greig's new play, *The Events*, and *Ciara*, the

latest from David Harrower, but on Monday evenings audiences will also be treated to work by emerging artists courtesy of *Theatre Uncut* and the University of Edinburgh with Playwrights' Studio Scotland.

O'Loughlin's dream is to create a third space that will enable the Traverse to "bring the truly emergent in... Going forward we're looking at embracing newer artists and writers and this year we're starting to find moments to do that. But how exciting that would be to have them with us all festival round!"

One aspect of the Traverse that certainly won't be changing is its renowned bar. From the theatre's origins as a censorship-defying private club, the bar has been a space for lively discussion and debate, networking and socialising. "You know the Scottish word 'howff' asks founder Richard Demarco. "Howff" means a meeting place. It was a meeting place for writers, poets, musicians." Today, says O'Loughlin, the bar still has "a magnetic pull... there's something about the atmosphere of being down there that is as creative the work in *Trav 1* and *Trav 2*".

Because in the end, of course, the success of a theatre doesn't just depend on the work it presents. It depends on the audiences who see that work. That's why the Traverse bar is such a crucial part of the mix. "It's a space of engagement between audience and artists; and between different artists; and audience speaking to itself," says O'Loughlin. "It keeps that engagement between the people making the work and the people who are witnessing the work alive."