

Not the Dream School

an interview with Liz Lohead

by

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Judging by the large crowd in the Teviot Debating Hall, it is tempting to conclude that the current buzz in the literary world about the revival of poetry has some truth in it. But the gathering hasn't assembled for some new rock 'n' roller – they have come to hear one of the most enduring and popular of Scottish poets – Liz Lochhead. Her formidable reputation, boosted by radio, TV, and live performances, has been built mainly on her acute insights into the tension between the sexes and her ability to honestly portray the woman's viewpoint, both comically and sensitively, without descending into stock poetic imagery.

She is interested however, in myth as well as history, as she showed in her play, "Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off", where the theme of women in power is succinctly conveyed through her deft handling of that grey area between fact and fiction. She insists that that, "a life isn't a story."

During her performance at Teviot she remarks that she's "never in the forefront, but always sniffing out what's in the air." As she invited questions from the audience, I took the opportunity to gauge her opinion of the new poetry hype.

"Well, it's obviously just a marketing ploy, but if it raises the profile of poetry then that's no bad thing. I'm probably just a woman with a Glasgow accent, but there's a couple of these new poets that I don't get, like Maxwell for instance. But on the whole, there are more poets accessible and it boosts publicity."

So are poetry sales up?

"No."

Having debunked that myth, I asked her about the current state of feminism.

"I am a feminist and most women and men I know are feminists. But I've no message to put across. The debate is widening and so is the confusion – all this American revisionism is just not appropriate for Britain, it's not devised for this country. Personally, I'm not as interested about these things now. Poetry's not for agitprop, it's for things you've worked out for yourself, and though I'm less ambivalent about women's issues, I know that what really counts for the vast majority are small issues like dampness in housing estates."

And patriotism?

"My interest in nationality has increased over the past couple of years, but my country has always been womankind. Again, writing in Scots is not overtly to convey a message. The national movement and the strong revival in writing in Scots is not sentimental. There's been some great writing in Scots over the past few years by people like Bill Herbert and Matthew Fitt, and their approach to issues in Scots couldn't have existed fifteen years ago."

Liz does not approve of the word 'dialect'. She knows that the literati at heart expect poetry to be "posh, grown up, English and dead" – a point she light-heartedly makes in a break from her performance which veers from the comic to the unpretentiously dramatic. The audience are enthralled, her magic works, and no-one leaves unsmiling.

Afterwards, in the more relaxed environs of the bar, I ask her to embellish on the problem of Scots.

"I think it's a trap people fall into – accepting it as a dialect poetry, accepting it as being irrelevant, comic and nostalgic – that's a danger. What's happening with this so-called new wave of Scottish poets is that they accept that Scots should be taken seriously. When I say that it's dramatic, I mean that it's connected with voice – a voice slightly different from my own voice because I don't really speak Scots. I speak English with a strong Glasgow accent. On the other hand I've got this well of Scots that comes from my grandmother and my mother. There's this Scots way of saying things. Whenever I'm writing drama it can come out quite

strongly. The thing about drama is that it accentuates the split. Everybody's bilingual to a certain extent, but the Scots are particularly aware of different registers of speech. You tend to feel that American kids can talk to their parents about fucking up."

Fucking up – don't we all? In her poems, Liz Lochhead reveals how we do, but does she convey it uncompromisingly or does the technique of poetry soften the blow? In one of her poems – 'A Giveaway' – she writes, "Poets don't bare their souls, they bare their skill." Does she still believe this?

"Yes. I don't try and reveal my soul because you will anyway. You can't help revealing your soul, but you've got to ignore that because it'd be embarrassing if you thought about it. For instance, 'Little Women', the new poem I did tonight, sounds like a complete confessional but there's not a word of truth in it."

Why do you keep making the point that poetry's fiction?

"Because people always think that poets are revealing their real selves. There's not such a big difference between poets and science-fiction novelists...you always dramatise things."

But don't you think you're kidding yourself, saying that's not really me, but the words look clever?

"Well I never really think of whether it's me or not me. I'm not interested in the 'me-ness' of it. I'm interested in the 'it' – you work on the 'it' to get it done. The 'you-ness' of it's going to come out anyway. I don't know what I'm really saying, my job is to keep saying something. Other people can make what they want of it."

Who are these 'other people' now? Early on in her career, she stated that she tried to relate to the landlady. Is this still the case?

"No. I find it harder and harder to write as I get older. I think it's because at first when you're doing it, it's a lot of crap but you don't bother about it. You sort of go too early. I don't mean you shouldn't be critical – you should be very critical, but if you can't get something down to be critical of...well..."

Do you cringe when you look back at your early stuff?

"Oh aye. It seems about as much to do with you as when you look back at pictures at a school dance or something. But there's no point in being embarrassed when you look back. The thing is – a poem is just something private that comes up. A poem could lie there under the bed, but it still exists, whereas when you've written a play, you've got to put it on."

So, what prompts you to show a private poem to someone rather than keep it to yourself?

"To get rid of it maybe."

Liz Lohead has gotten rid of a lot of poems, but of late her talents have diversified considerably. Along with her acting, play writing, and a recent excursion into short stories, she has also written a short film for the BBC's 'Tartan Shorts' series and hopes to direct a production of her own Scots adaptation of Moliere's 'Tartuffe' for this year's Edinburgh Festival. After our interview, she was rushing off to catch the overnight train to London where she is recording a voice-over for Bill Forsyth's new film, 'Being Human'. Busy, still refreshingly enthusiastic, and bloody talented – truly a Scottish Renaissance woman.