

## AN INTERVIEW WITH LIZ LOCHHEAD

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An essential reference in contemporary Scottish literature, Liz Lochhead has consolidated her career as a poet, playwright and performer since she began publishing in the 1970s. Born in Motherwell, Lanarkshire, in 1947, she went to Glasgow School of Art where she started writing. After some eight years teaching art in Glasgow and Bristol, she travelled to Canada (1978) with a Scottish Writers Exchange Fellowship and became a professional writer. *Memo for Spring* (1971), her first collection of poems, won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award and inaugurated both a prolific career and the path many other Scottish women writers would follow afterwards. As a participant in several workshops—Stephen Mulrine’s, Philip Hobsbaum’s and Tom McGrath’s—where other contemporary writers like Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard or James Kelman also collaborated, Lochhead began to create a prestigious space of her own within a markedly masculine canon. Her works have been associated with the birth of a female voice in Scottish literature and both her texts and performances have had general success in Britain and abroad. Her plays include *Blood and Ice* (1982), *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1989), *Perfect Days* (1998), and adaptations like Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1985) and *Miseryguts (The Misanthrope)* (2002), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1989), Euripides’ *Medea* (2000), which won the 2001 Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (2000) and Euripides and Sophocles’ lives of Oedipus, Jokasta and Antigone in *Thebans* (2003). She has recently published a collection of poems, *The Colour of Black and White* (2003), with new and old texts from previous collections like *Dreaming Frankenstein* (1984), *True Confessions and New Clichés* (1985) and *Bagpipe Muzak* (1991). She was Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University (1986–1987) and also at the Royal Shakespeare Company (1988) and was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Edinburgh in 2000. Liz Lochhead lives in the West End of Glasgow, where this interview took place, as part of the research for my Ph.D., in January 2004.

*I believe you have just come back from Prague where one of your plays, Perfect Days, has been recently premiered in Czech.*

Yes, it was translated into a lot of languages, but I haven’t seen any of the productions. Already it went before to Japan, Germany, Brazil, Norway, and then it’s been in Czech.

*How does it feel to leave your text in the hands of translators?*

I am very happy. I have no idea of what they are doing. You just have to trust the translator. I saw the one in Prague and I could tell that it had been changed a lot, because

certain of the rhythms had changed, you know, the play starts with a big long speech and it started with a very long dialogue between two people, so ...

*You have worked on translations and adaptations yourself, like Tartuffe and Misery Guts, among others, getting the originals close to a Scottish audience. From this experience, do you believe that translators are also translators of cultures?*

I am not really a translator, I am an adapter, and I am just making versions of Greek plays that there have been many versions of. It's quite lucky for the play it does not depend on me. For example, if I am making a version of *Three Sisters* ... if somebody doesn't like my version—which many people didn't, some people did—it is alright. That is very much an adaptation, because it was set at a different time, it wasn't even set in Russia. I was trying to show that the plays are not stuck in a context. So I didn't feel in any way guilty or worried. I am really doing my version of these plays. I am not doing the plays, you know; if I didn't do it, then the play would be on the shelf rather than on the theatre. I am quite free to let go. And yet, when I am doing something like Molière, I'm incredibly faithful, as far as I can be. The version of *The Misanthrope*, called *Misery Guts*, is completely updated; it's set in the present, but everything that I got was in the original play. I wouldn't really like to ever be translating a foreign play for a foreign writer, because I would feel the responsibility very great to get the tone of the play as it really is, whereas I am free to do my version of that particular play.

*Many of your works have been involved in the rewriting of previous texts, from Greek Classics like Medea or Thebans to more recent Classics like Dracula, Frankenstein, in Blood and Ice, or the Molière's texts we have mentioned. I understand that each piece of work must have had a motive of its own to be written down, but I have the feeling that, in a way, all of them manage to connect different contexts with the present of Scotland. Could we read an underlying message in them that emphasises the participation of other cultural narratives in the construction of our own, that clarifies the impossible autonomy of cultural identities?*

Yes. The things that I go for, anyway, have got a core story that is universal, really, or I wouldn't understand them, because I'm not really very culturally adept or adaptable myself. I don't mean that you have to necessarily do anything to make things relevant. I don't have to set a Greek play here and now to make it relevant, because the things it talks about are relevant for all time. On the other hand, I don't have a universal theory. In other occasions, like with *The Misanthrope*, I completely brought it up to date to the here and now, because it struck me that I could do that. There were things that I could see I could do, but when I'm doing a Greek play I just try to do a very lucid version for a particular company. Because I do translations and adaptations in the theatre, I don't even just do them for myself, I try to do them for a particular company, so sometimes I might have a stricter appointment, the actors ...

*So they interfere quite a lot ...*

No, they don't interfere, no, but I have a particular context and reason to do it. No, they don't really interfere, but I'm writing for a particular production, rather than just doing

a version of the play, a bit of literature, I'm working in a particular context. I would like to actually translate some poems or things that hadn't existed in various other versions in English or in Scots. That would be quite interesting for me, but I would feel much more of a sense of responsibility than I have to feel with these particular texts, because these texts are going to find another day without me.

*Some of your texts evoke the presence of monsters in the unconscious. You have explored this in reference to Dracula and Frankenstein, among other popular images from literary texts. In fact, Rebecca E. Wilson seems to have taken the title of her Sleeping With Monsters: Conversations with Irish and Scottish Women Poets (1990) from your reflection on Adrienne Rich's line "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters" to explore the contradictions within and the fragmentation of the female self in nationalist contexts. She even describes these creatures as "a fusion of contradictions." Are these contradictions necessarily negative?*

No, not at all. I don't even necessarily agree with her. Well, I don't necessarily disagree with her. I'm just not very interested particularly in understanding why I want to write particular things. To benefit from a dream you do not have to interpret it, so I don't necessarily come to the same conclusions as she does. I don't necessarily want to come to any conclusions, because if you are going to deal with things that are in the unconscious, if you bring them into consciousness, you could drop them off their power and that would be all. I would probably have to reread that. It was almost twenty years ago, wasn't it? It was eighty-six or eighty-seven, well, a good fifteen or sixteen years ago. Things have changed quite a lot and I haven't consciously thought about a lot of things. I probably moved sideways in a lot of my themes, interests, just because life changes, you know.

*Now, if we consider Gregory Smith's—and then Hugh MacDiarmid's—"Caledonian Antisyzygy," the overmentioned bipolar identity of the Scots, are you with authors, like Tom Nairn (1992: 6) in reference to the 1979 referendum, who see this as a recurring motto for those who try to justify the political immobilisation of an internally-colonised people?*

It did seem to have happened in 1979, then these things seem to have changed by the early nineties. I think that was quite shocking to a lot of people, not particularly to me, I wasn't very interested in it myself, I wasn't particularly interested in national identity. At that time I think I was too involved with female identity and female identity within Scotland, really. So I wasn't probably incredibly surprised at what happened at the referendum. I would be now! Now when I look back, I think, "What kind of country does not want more control of its own affairs?" That seems incredible to me now, but at the time, I didn't even vote, not because I wouldn't have voted, but because I wasn't even here in the country, I was actually in Canada at that time. Politically what happened was that at that time, the Labour Party, which is the one that Scots vote for almost exclusively, had said that they didn't support the creation of a new government, they had spoken out against it. So the party that most people in Scotland voted for was kind of against it, so it was very difficult for it to happen. But it was a bit of a shock to everybody when it did not happen! Because most of the people did vote for it, but not enough. There was this rule ... the majority of people had voted YES, that they would like Devolution, but that percentage of people who had voted for Devolution was not regarded as being high enough, so the whole thing went

by the board. And I think I really got a fright at that point! I thought, “Oh, my God, this is appalling!” And so there was gradually a cultural kind of impetus, a strengthening of identity, the kind of identity that you don’t keep questioning if you accept that you’ve got one. If you are going to be questioning identity all the time, that is about wondering whether or not you’ve got a legitimate one, isn’t it? But once a sort of cultural push went behind it, and then politically, the world followed the culture. I think that was a very different Scotland that was voting the next time. It did feel much more interested in its own affairs. At that time we had seen a lot of different things happening, Eastern Europe finding Western Europe ... and the very fact that we all voted all the time through Thatcher’s days. We still voted Labour, but we didn’t get a Government, so as a country we voted in one way and we were governed in another way for almost twenty years, so by the time the next referendum came along, we definitely knew what to do.

*In an interview with Emily Todd you mentioned that “the big split in Scotland is between self and other self” (1995: 122). Is Scottish identity essentially hybrid?*

Scotland is a very mixed-up kind of place, and I think that was something that by the end people recognised that it was a mixed-up place, but there was an identity that was called “Scotland.” They gathered all these other small things, and that’s how people felt at the end of the nineties, I think, when they were voting.

*You have also rewritten Scotland’s history in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, a play that seems to highlight ambiguity in many respects. To start with, *La Corbie*, “the spirit of Scotland,” as you have described it somewhere else, is “an interesting, ragged ambiguous creature,” that is constantly destabilising the meanings of the historical narration of this period—as the rest of the play does—and also of the other characters’ performances. Does *La Corbie* invite us not to trust official discourse, not even official subversive discourse?*

You are not sure if she is a bird or a woman. She is a woman, but you are never sure if she is a person or a crow or if she is alive at the time of Mary or if she is now telling it all. She is kind of an immortal spirit, a shaman. She starts telling the audience “This is my version of the story. You’d better listen to me, I’m the boss! I change it all.” And she doesn’t ever speak to Elizabeth, she speaks to Mary a couple of times, so she may be a kind of a ghost of a jester. She’s a kind of strange speaker, but it seemed to me that she could make it tight together. You’ve got a story—the first half of it—in which the pieces do not follow after each other particularly. In the first half of the play, right up until the time when she’s feeding soup to the person who is going to be her husband—that’s the first change, really—the bits before that, what we are really seeing is all the different forces that are working at the same time; we see her with Knox, we see her with Bothwell, we see her with her maid. We see the different kinds of things that are pushing her—the nobles, the Church—but all those things were pushing her at the same time, they do not follow one after the other necessarily. But when she starts feeding soup to the boy, she is already responding to something that Elizabeth has done. That is one of the actions in the first half. Elizabeth is just such a complicated thing to write about; Elizabeth is a much more active character, she does things to stay in power.

*And the fact that the play is called Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off and then it is Elizabeth who shares Mary's protagonism, does it have to do with the way England and Scotland are represented?*

Yes. It has to do with all these things between England and Scotland, male and female, and civil power, like the Church, some sort of democracy growing for a while. It is an interesting play to be written by Republicans. And also it is about Catholics and Protestants very much as well, because that was a very good story that was going on too. And it seems to me that what the children are representing, at the end of the play, is that the Scots are stuck with all these things.

*So is the end a pessimistic or an optimistic one? Because the kids inherit these roles ... but are they responsible for their behaviour, or are they innocent, or maybe both?*

Well, they are quite innocent, but they are stuck with all that. So this is a play that says, "This is who we are," "Do we have to always be like this?" Because I don't think we have to stay the way we are with the children. They were a powerful kind of image. There was no-one that understood it before doing it! I think that's the thing; academics come and ask you questions, and they are based on what the result was, and of course one has thought various things after writing the play, but if you thought those things consciously beforehand ... These things are not necessarily the questions that I think about consciously. I maybe deal with these things and then, afterwards, see what I must have been thinking about. It's sort of that way round. You find out what you think by what kind of pictures you make up.

*There is a scene I am particularly interested in, "The Dance of Salome," when the Mummers appear, the scene where the aristocrats become these ambiguous creatures and manipulate Darnley so that he assassinates Riccio. What strikes me in this section again is the ambiguous interpretation of it. Since these characters lose their identity when they start controlling the action, and since the action could be controlled in that direction by any other character, could we perhaps understand that the play is warning us not only against the dangers of not questioning inherited traditions and roles, but also against the dangers assumed by those who seem to exercise power on other people's lives? Because this power slips from anyone's hands ...*

I think so. That bit is completely unhistorical, of course. Because I was working with a particular theatre company with a particular style, I wondered, "How am I going to deal with the murder of Riccio?, What would I do it as?", so I decided to do it as a little play within a play. When I look back it is very interesting, but I've got no idea why I didn't just have some people come in and commit the murder. It was because of the amount of people I had, which was very small, and I had to find a way of making them just be somebody else. The fact that they were wearing masks, doing a play, I don't know, coming in pretending to be somebody else and then killing Riccio ... when they joke, when they say things like "Up to you Geordie" or "Aye, Tam," that's the line about who they really were as well. Then Corbie comes in with a list of the people they really were, but as we have not met them in the drama, they are just a set of nobles. This is a very complicated story to try and write a play about. You do all this research and there are lots and lots of things happening, you have to try to simplify the story.

*And the interchangeability of the characters has to do with the amount of people you had, then?*

Yes. It had to be done with six actors or so—Elizabeth, Mary, Corbie, Knox, Darnely, Bothwell, Riccio—and one of the people couldn't really act very well, he was a dancer. Because I had these people to tell the story, then it came out in that way, which was all plus for the play—really I should pretend that I'm working with that company to write other plays. I think that having a small company to work for was good. Corbie partly exists because of the particular actress that I wrote it for. It was like, "What part am I going to get for Myra?" She is a great singer! You know, the play was so much a product of what I was doing and the reason I was doing it, which is the way you have to get with the things you are working on, which is why I think it would be very hard to be a novelist, because where are all your external difficulties and external reasons, you see? In theory you can do anything, but in the theatre you've only got four actors or six actors. This is a play that I think that works very well, but I had no idea that it was going to work very well, I mean, I was panicking a few months before! I didn't know how to do it, but we found a way because of that company's style. I thought that would be a good thing to do, to have them come in and be kind of funny and sinister at the same time. I don't know why Salome came up, but it seemed that it was another story about a head that gets cut off.

*And also perhaps the fact that religious plays were banned during the Reformation?*

I guess so. That's true! I never thought really about that, but that's absolutely true. That these things like mystery plays were really despised by Knox. Scotland doesn't really have a drama for a long time because it had such an early and such a vigorous Reformation. You don't get Scots Restoration dramas and Restoration comedies, and Jacobean dramas, because at the time of the Jacobean themes it was done down there in England.

*On the other hand, Mary, the last queen of an independent Scotland, was herself quite a cultural hybrid in her time, and with the passing of time, the general despise many felt towards her when she was alive has been redefined, since nowadays the queen seems to have become some kind of symbolic maternal figure for the nation and a representation of Scotland's suffering in the relations with England.*

Yes. You are working with history but you are also working with myth right from the beginning. There is something mythic about her—and also something mythic about Elizabeth as well—but she's kind of real, as well as mythic. It's very interesting, that they were two women on the throne at the same time and at a time when everything was changing, a bit of a quirk of History, really. It seems to me that the Reformation was a time of great, great change, when people were redefining what their relationship with the world was; out of Protestantism really, in the end, comes Marxism, in a sense. If something is saying that it's up to one individual's relationship with God, you know, that starts the whole anti-royalist feeling. You know, "What sense is there in having a king or a queen?"

*Now, if we move on to contemporary Scotland, Alasdair Gray has said in an interview that the Devolution of the Parliament has left Scottish intellectuals without a cause to fight for, that*

*now is the time to show that apart from being politically involved, Scottish writers are quality writers (Graham-Yooll 2000). What do you think about this?*

I think the things that Alasdair is talking about are true of himself rather than other people, because I think of somebody like James Kelman, and the very political aspects of his work, but he's just describing the reality that he sees around him, and for any writer, nothing is going to be solved by a bit of political success. There's going to be other parts of life to be in opposition to or to document, so I don't really see it as a danger for writers. Yes, it takes away something, something that one could write about, for sure, but there will be other things that you can write about ...

*Keeping an identity of your own?*

Yes, I think so. We may not be so worried about identity, but that would be just us. Identity is not something you can write about all your life. And it's not as that great as if things have changed enough with the Parliament. We are stuck with all the things that we don't like about our identity, perhaps we shouldn't have to worry so much about changing. These are not to me artistic poses, you know, when we still write about human life and its complexities and its contradictions and the possibilities which will remain much the same since the time of the Greeks, but on another level we wouldn't be able to whine about things. For instance, we get a Scottish National Theatre and people say to me, "What do you feel when you hear that there is going to be one?" And what I feel is afraid, I think "My God, this needs to be good now! What if it isn't?" So, of course, we'll have to prove the other things that you said, that we could do it, if we got the chance. We'll have to adapt and we'll have to come to terms with our own failures and try to change things rather than concentrate on the inequalities or difficulties. You know, writing not from the underdog position anymore would be interesting.

*Many of your texts have been associated with the birth of a female voice—one that shows itself multifaceted—that negotiates the monolithism of exclusive conceptions of a traditional Scottish identity. Other contemporary Scottish women authors, like Jackie Kay, have stated that your texts have been of great relevance in the creation of their own literary voices. For example, in an interview in the e-journal Free Verse (2002), Kay says about you: "I identify with Liz Lochhead. She was one of the first poets that I ever heard. I think that certain people are flame carriers for a whole lot of people to come after them. I would say that without Liz Lochhead I wouldn't exist. Lochhead was one of the first women poets that made it possible to speak in her own voice, which was a Scottish voice." Are you conscious of this influence?*

Yes, in a sense I am, but if it wasn't for me being there early they would still have done it and they would have been influenced by another person. When I was writing in Scottish there was just Muriel Spark, but she was now living in England, but there was something about the fact that she was Muriel Spark and that she had lived in Edinburgh that was kind of reassuring. Of course you look to older writers and the interesting question is why there weren't many other women writers just at the time that I came along. There weren't. And they had been marginalised by the men really. Most of Scottish writing was poetry at that time—I'm talking about the very early seventies—and poets were men: MacKay,

Morgan ... Poetry was very much a male thing, but that changed, I think, you know, Kathleen Jamie, Jackie Kay ... I think Jackie's stories are fantastic! The short stories, the voices ... but I don't like the form of *Trumpet* (1998), the structure. You know, sometimes you get a monologue from the undertaker ... and I don't like the form of it, but when it comes to the short stories, I think "Yes, this is it!"; I mean, I like the stories and the bits of *Trumpet*, the actual pieces of writing, I think they are wonderful, and it was a great success.

*In your last collection of poems, The Colour of Black and White, you dedicate some poems to Kay, Carol Ann Duffy and others.*

Yes, they give you things to work from, they are wonderful!

*For example, in "Black and White Allsorts," the poem you dedicate to Jackie Kay and whose title connects with the title of the whole collection, you ennumerate a series of black and white objects ...*

She encourages me to write nursery rhymes and silly things and so on. When I did one about aunties, she liked that and she encourages me to keep this child-like side of myself open, I think.

*And she also writes for children herself.*

She does. She does that very well. She and Carla too.

*Is there any special reason why you chose black and white objects?*

No. It's just a list of black and white things that I like or that I knew about or that somebody said, like "My mother had a cultured pearl necklace" and that had been given to her by some boys on a beach, for instance, that's the kind of thing. It's just a set of black and white things. It's just a list and it's difficult to say out loud.

*The Colour of Black and White reflects on the imagination of the past—a past in black and white, as in old films, like the poem you dedicate to Ian McMillan, "In the Black and White Era," where the hard times of the postwar period are evoked—or a multiple construction of our memory, of our past, and perhaps of our own identity. As an example we have "Sorting Through": "The moment she died, my mother's dance dresses/turned from the colour they really were/to the colours I imagine them to be."*

Yes. All black and white snapshots and the past is black and white, but it's coloured as well. Yes, I think so. I just knew gradually that that was the title. Well, the title was actually given to me by Willie Rodger, the artist that illustrated the book. I knew it was "Black and White" something, "Black and White Songs," or "Black and White Poems" or something like this. Then he said, "What about 'The Colour of Black and White?'" And I said, "Yes!"

*Many of the poems in The Colour of Black and White reflect on the fifties, a period that like the eighties in Scotland, you seem to have explored in your writing. Is there a reason for that?*



There will be ... I don't know what it is. If I think about it, they are two periods of my life that I feel very vividly about. The fifties was very much about being tiny and being very small and understanding certain things. And the eighties was very much about working out many things. That was my thirties. That was in some ways difficult, but very useful time, very much about working out who I was, which I suppose was the same as in the fifties. Other times maybe there's not so many things I would make poems out of. I think both these times were times when things were changing and maybe I thought things were one way and then I could see them being something else.

*And about the eighties, in Bagpipe Muzak, you write very ironically about the Glasgow City of Culture events ...*

They are probably a lot of fun things for me to write about. They are not very good, really not very deep. I was just putting down what people were saying. And because everyday felt the same, we only made up a little bit of fun just to cope with it. They are not very personal or very profound, it was just about having fun.

*You have frequently mentioned the importance of fun in your creative process. Is this still the case?*

I guess so. Yes, if you didn't enjoy doing it, you'd be crazy to keep doing it. Of course you don't enjoy most of it a lot of times, but other times you do.

*Is that the reason for your collaboration with Michael Marra in Flagrant Delicht?*

Yes. We have done the show quite a lot. That's how we call the show when we get together and do things. It's just fun.

*And how do you feel on the stage?*

Oh, I like doing that. That's fun! This June, this May and June, we are going to be on the road a lot, so that'll be good fun.

*Future plans?*

I've got a new play that I'm just finishing. I'm working quite hard to finish that. Also I have another one to write for the last part of the year. That's going to be somehow more difficult ... One is nearly finished, but the other one ... I've got a character's name ... but I know so little about her ... we will see, that'll be alright ... One will happen next spring and one will happen next summer or autumn, with the rehearsal and all this and that.

*Will you carry on with the Classics, like Medea, Thebans ... ?*

Not for a bit. I want a rest from these Greek plays.

*I saw Medea at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2000. I enjoyed it very much.*

*Medea* was great, wasn't it? I liked it a lot too. The actress, Maureen Beattie, is fantastic! It was quite successful. The play is good, you know, the text is good, and I am really pleased with it, but I think we need to do a new production of it. Maybe there will be another production some day. I'd like to think so.

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