

magnetic
north

The Dream Train

A play in counterpoint

There was more food for thought, though, in the other major opening of the weekend. Presented at the Traverse by the newly formed Magnetic North company, Tom McGrath's new play **Dream Train** is certainly set in Scotland; although in a strange, parallel-universe Scotland vaguely referred to as Caledon, and in a time-warp that combines ancient British Rail trains with mobile phones. But its theme is almost disturbingly universal; this is a surreal, poetic, sometimes irritating but essentially shapely dream-play, inspired by Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, about the longing of older people for the young, or for the touch of eternal youth and renewal that has something to do with art. In a castle somewhere on Scotland's east coast, a moth-eaten baron obsessed with the music of Bach struggles to sleep. He is tended by a strange androgynous figure, sometimes the young 18th-century pianist Goldberg himself, sometimes a beautiful young girl who seems to love him; meanwhile, on a train labouring its way up the same coast, the baron's beautiful but ageing wife meets an intensely attractive young man heading for the same station. For 90 minutes, this quartet of characters - led by Mary McCusker, in wonderful form as the baroness - weave their way in and out of one another's dreams and realities. The overall effect is sad, beautiful, purposeful, and, in a playful kind of way, very grown-up.

Joyce McMillan

Monday, 15 November 1999 THE SCOTSMAN

Theatre

The Dream Train, The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh
Robert Thomson

IT IS not often the case that if a writer's work - be it dramatical or musical - sends you to sleep, it could be regarded as anything other than a failure. I mention this with reference to Tom McGrath's new play only because the drama's inspiration is Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* - a piece of music allegedly written in 1741 for Count von Keyserling, Russian ambassador to the Court of Saxony and inveterate insomniac, in order to put him to sleep.

When one of McGrath's characters makes the comment that the music is too lively for insomniacs, it is a good defence also for the play - a strange, unsettling meditation that captures perfectly that surreal moment between sleeping and waking when reality is not yet fixed. Taking its form also from the composer, the play has a contrapuntal quality - if not always clarity - as the story of an insomniac baron, willing the "variations" to work for him through his weirdly conversational hi-fi-cum-harpsichord, dovetails with the train journey of a middle-aged woman and a young man, through a landscape that is Highland-line Scotland placed somewhere in Eastern Europe.

The melodiousness of the counterpoint may not be constant, but McGrath finely judges how we learn she is the baron's wife, he is his unacknowledged son. In total, Bach offers 30 variations on his theme and the script, along with Nicholas Bone's production, displays a degree of over-zealousness in capturing this intensity, but in taking risks with language, structure, and story this makes for a strong debut from Bone's Magnetic North company.

The HERALD, Monday November 15, 1999

Magnetic North Theatre Productions

The Dream Train by Tom McGrath

Press reviews 2000 version



The Dream Train, Tron Theatre, Glasgow
Michael Tumelty

LAST night I came out of the opening night of Magnetic North's revival of Tom McGrath's play, *The Dream Train*, feeling a bit like one of the characters. I knew that I'd just watched an enthralling piece of theatre directly inspired by Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The contrapuntal layering of the four characters – in every conceivable combination – could be observed at a visual and literal level.

And, indeed, taking it at that level, it was intriguing enough.

Is the insomniac Baron a contemporary figure, urging his muse to will him to sleep with Bach's legendary musical soporific? Is he imagining his wife in a brief encounter with a younger man on a train? Is he, in fact, asleep and dreaming? The permutations are deliciously endless. And all the while a recorded performance of the *Goldberg Variations* (Glenn Gould?) threads through the performance.

But, in fact, I didn't emerge as though I'd been watching a play.

I felt as though I had been sucked into a visual representation of the *Goldberg Variations* themselves, magically transformed into language and physical gesture.

Everything was there, every stricken contrapuntal device, metamorphosed into something tangible: imitation, canons, fugues – even the inversions and mirror images.

It genuinely became impossible to distinguish the effect of language from the image of the musical techniques.

Sounds like an intellectual exercise, I know, but, under Nicholas Bone's superb direction, and with splendid performances from Simon Scott, Mary McCusker, Derek McGhie, and the versatile Lynn Edmonstone, it's witty, touching, even macabre at its climax, but, like the great composition itself, eventually coming to rest. I actually felt as though I gained a new insight into music I've known and loved for 40 years.

Can't say better than that.

The Herald Thursday September 28, 2000

Dream Train ★★★★★

The Tron, Glasgow

JS Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were the inspiration for this play by Tom McGrath and, in the opening scene of this production by Magnetic North, it is Bach's music that first touches the senses as light gradually dawns on the tiered stage.

On the layered set, the characters operate like notes on a musical stave. The voices come in, sometimes in unison as chords, sometimes in counterpoint — always in harmony. The characters appear bewildered, the steps they walk upon are the layers of meaning in the story that is about to unfold. The host of alternative endings that bring the play to a close leave its audience in a state of sublime confusion. This whimsical mood is a departure for McGrath from his usual narrative style.

Dream Train questions reality. The principal

character is an insomniac who cannot tell the difference between reality and his dreams. As the story proceeds, the characters draw the audience into the plot to the extent that we, too, believe that reality no longer matters.

Beautifully directed by Nicholas Bone and well acted by the majority of the cast - Simon Scott as the Baron and Derek McGhie as Chris are excellent but Lynn Edmonstone as Julie seems to struggle — the fact that this is a difficult play to grasp does not detract from its enjoyment. Glimpses of *Oedipus*, *Alice in Wonderland* and even the film, *The Matrix*, are visible through the fog. All in all, *Dream Train* is an original, refreshing piece of work.

On tour: Adam Smith Theatre, Kirkcaldy, tonight; MacRobert Arts Centre, Stirling, tomorrow.

Morag Fleming

The Scotsman, 5 October 2000