

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.

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