

NEW DRAMA

WORD FOR WORD

Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh,  
until Sat 29 Mar, then touring.



Inheritance is one thing that is guaranteed to tear a family apart. Once-close relatives fight over the nice kitchen tallboy, or the priceless set of stainless steel grapefruit spoons. But Linda McLean's latest play, produced by Magnetic North, is an examination of the family heirlooms we inherit without even knowing.

AnnMartha (Linda Kerr Scott) is 107 years old. Oona (Linda Duncan McLaughlin) is 37, and Marja (Helen McAlpine) is nearly 18. They are family, but not of direct ascend-ance, as their line is afflicted with a condition resulting in certain women dying as soon as their first child is born. Marja is the last of the line, unless she has a child. She doesn't yet know that if she does, her life is over. But centenarian AnnMartha is the primary focus of the attentions of video documentarist Ben (John Kazek). She is the last remaining speaker of a dying language, which he has been requested to document for preservation and reference; a cultural bequest for future peoples to inherit.

McLean's play, directed

by Nicholas Bone, is sweeping in its scope, and beautiful in its execution. The collaborative process by which it has been born encompasses mathematical theory, architecture and music, and the product is haunting and poetic. If just one member of the cast weren't up to scratch, this consummately intelligent piece of drama would fall flat, but all are on top form, especially Helen McAlpine, a rising star of Scottish theatre, as always a real pleasure to watch. Scott's genealogical elder is frail but with a resilient core, demanding cigarettes and blethering away from her chair, while McLaughlin is beautifully dowdy as the inbetween-er, uncomfortably unsure of her own function in the chain of inheritance.

By turns witty and emotive, with real characters and a strong story, this is almost dramatic perfection. Deep as a gene pool, this is a play that grips you from the start and leaves you wondering where it's all going to end. One of the first truly beautiful productions you'll see this year. See it, and pass it on. (Gareth Davies)

**THE LIST** 27 Mar-10 Apr  
2003

# Time isn't always on your side

## REVIEWED

### WORD FOR WORD

TRAMWAY, GLASGOW, RUN ENDED;  
TOURING UNTIL APRIL 1

\*\*\*\*

## THEATRE

STEPHEN PHELAN

THERE'S a word for just about every-thing. And the one that Linda McLean is getting at here, I guess, is "change" - the word we use to express the fact that time is happening. One of the most telling words, you might say. And one of the saddest facts, since you can't often avoid change, reverse it, see it coming, or catch it in the act.

**Word For Word**, McLean's latest play - if we can accurately call it "hers", since the Magnetic North company rightly prides itself on the full partnership of playwright, composer, designer, chore-ographer, director - takes place some time around now, in a collapsing flat, in a build- ing slowly giving up to the rules of entropy and renewal.

Fading out with it is the oldest woman who lives there, or almost anywhere else (Linda Kerr Scott), and fading out with her is an ancient lan- guage, and all the words, stories and meanings of the people who used to speak it.

A photographer (John Kazek), worn out by the speed and turbulence of

**'It goes forward in an elliptical motion that does strange things to your own perception of time'**

events and trying to hold them still with a camera, is brought in by her family to record the dying granny speaking out loud and save those stories for good.

Old AnnMartha knows herself the way things go, so in tune with her an-

cient's death doesn't bother her, but the middle-aged daughter (Linda Duncan McLaughlin) and young granddaughter (Helen McAlpine) have trouble with their obligations to the past and future. Both of them feel frozen - one believes her life has stopped; the other that hers hasn't started - and the play goes forwards, in a finely choreographed elliptical motion that does strange things to your own perception of time, toward revealing the secret that might re-lease them all.

The cast play it out beautifully, Kazek in particular caught in that modern tension between the fear and the longing for the oldest patterns that can plot a person's life - family, history, home, love, death. AnnMartha's joyful tales of "Deirdre the horned" are spoken in a Scottish dialect, and you can read this play as a song for the passing of local lan- guage. But universally, McLean and co are reminding us that we our- selves are stories; and about the old- est, most valuable counsel that sto- ries can provide - yes, everything changes, but nothing is ever really lost.

**sunday herald**  
23 March 2003

# Spreading the word

Lurking in Tramway's warehouse, a theatre group is exploring a strange tale. Neil Cooper reports

IN THE daytime, Glasgow Tramway's warehouse space looks barren, but in rehearsal there's something going on that's as true to its internationalist, experimental roots as the Peter Brook and Robert Lepage shows it was created for.

In Tramway 4, a work-in-progress is being lovingly fine-tuned. As one performer spins another around, director Nicholas Bone and movement coordinator Marisa Zanotti watch, hawk-like. The process is repeated again and again in an attempt to capture the essence of elation it signifies. A recording of impressionistic piano music is added, then taken away, then eventually put back as the rhythm and pace of the piece re-finds itself. As an example of live art, it couldn't be more appropriate to the blank canvas of its immediate surroundings.

The performers here are actors rather than dancers, speaking their lines in synch with their steps, telling a good old-fashioned story with discipline and elan. Also in attendance is playwright Linda McLean, as essential a contributor to the process as those on the floor. It's her play that's being done, after all.

Welcome to the world of Magnetic North, the theatre company founded in 1999 by director Nicholas Bone to explore and extend creative disciplines, but always keep the writer at the heart of the action. Its debut, *The Dream Train* might have been based on the structure of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and is about to be produced by a German contemporary dance company. It's still playwright Tom McGrath's name that comes at the top of the page.

*Braziliana* stretched boundaries even further, with Ronan

O'Donnell's text, married to Stephen Davismoon's score, performed exclusively on the internet. Last year the company moved into digital film with Joern Utkilen's *Swan Song*. Now here they are with *Word for Word*, McLean's multi-layered tale of an old woman who is the last native speaker of an ancient language.

"It began," according to Bone, "with a desire to explore working with patterns. As a starting point we looked closely at number sequences in order to devise a structure for the work, just as an abstract way of seeing where it led us. We also wanted the creative team involved from the very start, so the designer, the composer, the movement person, and so on, all became involved in what was almost a dramaturgical way. What that taught us was to understand how each discipline works, both on its own and relating to others. For instance, as Linda looked at how a designer works, that began to inform how the play was actually written."

The genesis of *Word For Word*



**THE QUESTION IS  
WHETHER IT  
TRANSLATES TO  
WHAT A PAYING  
AUDIENCE WILL  
BE WATCHING**

began at Cove Park Artists Centre, a retreat that gives creative partnerships the space to flourish without the hurly burly of production pressures intruding. "That was really important in terms of time," says Bone with all the softly spoken focus of a Zen master, "Just having the time and space to be free to think and talk and explore, without a deadline, is really important. Being in the middle of nowhere seems to help that as well."

While this in itself might sound to sceptics a bit hippy-dippy, get-my-head-together-in-the-country-ish, it nevertheless shows a rare respect for artistic practice beyond the production line of cost-effective rep. It's allowed Magnetic North to flex their own creative muscles in a quietly untroubled way.

For *Word For Word*, Bone has enlisted a crack squad of composer Dee Isaacs, designer Mark Leese, lighting designer Paul Sorley, and Zanotti. Casting, too, is important. As Bone admits: "You need intelligent actors who aren't afraid and who can remain open enough both to explore some of the ideas going on as well as challenging them."

"This piece, especially, taps into something at the very heart of what the actors are doing, which is about communicating something."

For all this esoteric talk of process, patterns, and practice, the question remains whether any of it actually translates to what a paying audience will be watching.

"No-one needs to know all this when they come in to see it. The way we've developed this as a piece of work has given us the freedom to come back to something quite structured and formal. I don't know whether that was as a result of the process or whether it's to do with a natural instinct we all have, but maybe again that's something to do with us being writer-based. What theatre is at its essence is telling stories, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. What we try to do is add different elements to that, and see where it goes."

**Word for Word, Tramway, Glasgow, Friday and Saturday, The Herald then touring.**

Thursday March 13, 2003