

Raymond Ross

BILL FINDLAY
(1947-2005)

THE death of Bill Findlay has robbed Scottish theatre, theatre studies and culture of one its most remarkable, original and pioneering spirits.

When *The Guid Sisters*, Findlay's rich, raucous and gritty Scots version of Québécois writer Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles Soeurs* first hit the Tron stage in Glasgow in 1989, it hit it running. It wasn't just that Findlay, aided and abetted by his Canadian co-translator Martin Bowman, had effected a potent transposition of the urban French of Montreal into contemporary demotic Scots; it was more like the said sisters had been sailing down Sauchiehall Street on a Saturday night for years - it was just we hadn't noticed them before.

This wasn't translation. This was trans-creation.

The Guid Sisters went on the following year to Toronto and the next year to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, followed by a Scottish tour, before taking the stage in Montreal itself to celebrate the city's 350th anniversary.

It was to prove the first of eight Bowman-Findlay trans-creations of Tremblay including *The Real World?*, *The House Among the Stars* and *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon*, which between them played houses from Glasgow, Perth and Edinburgh to New York, Toronto and London, entertaining packed houses in the Scottish vernacular.

Findlay's unerring ear for contemporary Scots usage has made Tremblay the most performed foreign-language playwright in Scotland in the past 16 years, leading one Toronto newspaper to dub the man from Montreal "McTremblay".

Tremblay's hold over Scottish audiences was, according to *The Scotsman*, "largely thanks to Bill Findlay and Martin Bowman's uncanny ability to relocate his aching hymns to the working-class families of Quebec to Scotland."

Findlay also worked with Bowman to translate from Québécois into Scots Jeanne-Mance Delisle's *The Reel of the Hanged Man* for Stellar

Quines Theatre Company; and Scots versions from his own pen included Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers* for Dundee Rep, Pavel Kohout's *Fire in the Basement* for Communicado, Teresa Lubkiewicz's *Werewolves* for Theatre Archipelago and Raymond Cousse's *Bairns' Bothers* for Mull Theatre.

A native of the ancient burgh of Culross in Fife, Findlay was proud of his Scots-speaking background but was thoroughly internationalist in outlook.

One of his favourite quotations from Hugh MacDiarmid expressed this internationalism. "If there's ocht in Scotland worth the hae'in / There is nae distance to which it's unattached," was adopted as the motto of the Scottish literary magazine *Cencrastus* which Findlay co-founded with myself and others in 1979.

Typical of the man, he thrust into our hands at the first editorial meeting an interview for publication which he had just done with a writer little known outside her native Canada -

Margaret Atwood. Bill remained on the *Cencrastus* board for many years, and was a contributor and adviser. There is a fitting, poetic irony that the magazine has decided to cease publication in the year of his untimely death.

His scholarly interests reflected his creative talents. In 1998 he edited *A History of Scottish Theatre*, a landmark in Scottish theatre studies, to which he contributed the opening chapter. He also edited *Scots Plays of the Seventies* (2001), *Frae Ither Tongues: Essays on Modern Translations into Scots* (2004) and (with John Corbett) the forthcoming *Serving Twa Maisters: An Anthology of Scots Translations of Classic Plays* (2005).

Most of the "McTremblay" playscripts have been published; and as a theatre scholar Findlay contributed to many other books, periodicals and magazines, both Scottish and international.

Born in 1947, the son of Wullie Findlay, an agricultural sales rep, and Hannah, a millworker, Bill was the fifth of six children. Educated at Dunfermline High School, he moved to London on leaving school in 1965 to become a clerical officer with the Ministry of Power. He then joined the clerical staff of the BBC, where the poor wages drove him into theatreland: he began to moonlight as a cloakroom attendant in the West End and it was here his love of theatre was born.

Returning to Scotland in 1970, he became a mature student when he took university entrance qualifications at Newbattle Abbey College (where he latterly served as an external examiner) before going on to Stirling University, where one of his tutors was the poet Norman MacCaig. He graduated in 1976 with first-class honours.

While at Stirling he also did an exchange year at the University of California, Santa Barbara, because, as he said: "Ah couldni swim and Ah was a peely-wally Scot that didni like the sun. Ah ainly went oot eftir daurk."

It was at Stirling in 1973 that he first met his future wife Jessica Burns.

After graduating he began and then abandoned research at Edinburgh University into the early 19th-century Scots novelist John Galt.

He spent 1981 teaching English in Argentina, coming home with stories about how "het up" the Argentinians were about some islands no-one had heard of called the Malvinas. "Aye, we cry them the Falklands," he said.

Fortunately, he was safely home before the conflict started.

Over the following years Findlay took up various lecturing posts while writing and translating under his own steam at Strathclyde University, The Robert Gordon University, Glasgow University and Glasgow Caledonian University before his last post as lecturer in drama and theatre arts at Queen Margaret University College in Edinburgh.

By the time he had completed his PhD thesis in 2000 on Motivation and Method in Scots Translation in Drama at QMUC he was so versed in his subject that his examiners were hoping he wouldn't embarrass them by asking any questions they couldn't answer.

A former member of the Scottish Arts Council drama committee, playwrights' bursaries panel and working party on Scots language theatre, he was also latterly on the advisory committee of the Scottish National Dictionary Association and a council member of the Scottish Society of Playwrights.

A Scottish republican and liberal socialist by conviction, he was proud of his working-class roots, and wherever he travelled or lived his thoughts

always returned to west Fife and Stirling. Stirling, he believed, should have been home to the Scottish Parliament.

A loving husband to Jessica and a loving father to his daughters Hannah and Martha, of whom he was immensely proud, he will be more than greatly missed.

For those who knew him, Bill was a man of incisive thought, sparkling wit and daft humour. He carried his learning lightly and modestly and was a great communicator imbued with a generosity of spirit befitting an inheritor and articulator of Scotland's democratic intellect.

To those who knew him only through his work these things are also true.

To adapt a tribute once paid to another great Scots Makar, the late Robert Garioch:

The Good Lord excelled himself/ in His creation of/ Bill Findlay.

Reference: <http://news.scotsman.com/obituaries/Bill-Findlay.2628820.jp>