

In conversation 1

Gavin Kostick, Literary Manager of Fishamble: the New Play Company in conversation with **Neil Murray**, Executive Producer of National Theatre of Scotland

Gavin Kostick: Very welcome to all of you. It's great to see everybody at this In Conversation. I thought, it's early enough in the morning so we'll just ease our way gently into this. I hope to make the best use of Neil's time, and there will be time for questions towards the end.

Neil and I, we meet occasionally every three years or so I think, on average. I first talked to Neil around the foundation of the Playwright Studio of Scotland, and then again in 2005 just before the launch of the Scottish National Theatre. So the last time we met he was about to go away and the first production was going to be *Home* and we were questioning about the lack of a building and so forth. So feel like I'm picking up from there. So if we ease our way into this.

On the bigger picture though, you got a parliament, you got yourself a Scottish National Party. The arc of prosperity running from Scandinavia through Scotland into Ireland, with Iceland thrown in. That was you, centre of all that, so what happened with that then?

Neil Murray: I think the clue there is that two of the biggest banks that collapsed had the word Scotland in the name. So we take the blame. We're sorry.

Gavin Kostick: Slightly more seriously though. Launching a National Theatre and having a cultural revolution almost, into those circumstances. How has that been in terms of affecting the big picture of where you are?

Neil Murray: It's been really interesting because, the whole genesis of the National Theatre of Scotland was as Scotland headed inexorably towards devolution in the end of the 1990s it was clear that it was going to happen. There had been no votes previously, there was just a sense that the country was going to vote yes, and indeed, the Labour Party had come around to that notion and they could kind of live with it now as well.

So once it became clear that it was going to be a yes for devolution, I think the theatre community for once quite perceptively looked around and thought, well, let's have a look. What don't we have that they would want to create with their mark on Scotland, culturally? We had an opera, we had a ballet company, we had a National Gallery, we had museums, and we had orchestras. We didn't have a national theatre. And then there was an ongoing, very long conversation about, should Scotland have a National Theatre, what should it look like? Should it be in Glasgow or Edinburgh? Should it be in Perth in the middle? Should it be in Sterling? Should it not happen at all?

Gavin Kostick: I'm sure we can all physically see Scotland in our heads, but just when I went to Scotland, what that emphasised to me was there's like a corridor of population across near the south border, essentially. Which is nearly everyone. And then there was nothing above.

Neil Murray: Well, the people of Orkney would disagree. They've got land, a lot of land. Not many people.

Gavin Kostick: In terms of locating national institutions it raises questions.

Neil Murray: It does, and the argument always was between Glasgow and Edinburgh, pretty much. When you said we have got a parliament, we've got probably the single most expensive overspent parliament building in the world. Dot com. This was a building that was

budgeted on the back of an envelope. I assume somebody must have done it on the back of an envelope. £40 million. Morales, you know, the Catalan architect. He doesn't make a shed for £40 million. And that building ended up costing us £400,000, which is the biggest single overspend in architectural history. So it was very clear they weren't going to give us another building ever again. There will never be another new building in Scotland. So they stopped. It kind of gave us, it gave the theatre community leave to say, actually we don't need another building, we've got enough buildings we struggle to fill. Let's have an organisation...

Gavin Kostick: You have enough theatre buildings specifically or you have enough...

Neil Murray: There's a pretty good infrastructure. Actually, the infrastructure benefited hugely from Lottery funding as well, so that most of the major cities have a theatre that's either been built or been refurbished through the Lottery. In Edinburgh the Traverse was pretty much a new build anyway, although it happened prior to the Lottery. So you had that building. In Glasgow – I worked at the Tron at that point – we got it refurbished. The Tramway. Everything was done. New buildings were built in Sterling, Perth. So there's a big infrastructure. We've got lots of seats to sell already if you are going to define theatre as being in buildings then yes.

Gavin Kostick: Yes, though I appreciate that's not the end of the story.

Can I just bring it forward a bit because you became Executive Producer, and then Vicky Featherstone ...

Neil Murray: No Vicky was first. Vicky is ... I'm her person on Earth. She's the goddess. Vicky was first, and Vicky was crucial. I have to say, without Vicky none of this would be happening. When they build the golden statues it will be her. She gets the statue.

Gavin Kostick: She came out of Paines Plough, which is a new writing company in England. A very excellent company. In a literal sense, do you think her background in new writing shaped the way the National Theatre went, or did it not really come into it?

Neil Murray: I think more her background as a director, as much as anything, and her personality. I think it was the boldest decision. I think we've forgotten that now. In Scotland she's become so much part of the establishment. Not the establishment – she'd never be that – but she's such a public figure, in a sense. At the time, I think her appointment by the board was the boldest, bravest thing. William Hill did not have her on their board, I don't think. 500 to 1, I think, or something. Until the day before the announcement there was feverish speculation. People were phoning around and saying, who is it, who is it? Vicky Featherstone's name was not in the frame at all.

Gavin Kostick: What made her so attractive, though?

Neil Murray: She's got lovely hair. No, what made her so attractive to me personally, I'd been working with her. You might see her from the Traverse, and the Traverse was part of our world. She was a renegade. She was fringe. She wasn't establishment. At the Tron we were co-producing a David Grieg's play at the time she was appointed and working on a project with Paines Plough. So for us it was, oh wow, this is someone we can really work with, as opposed to some of the people they could have appointed. We would work with anybody obviously, but it was such a surprise that it was somebody who was young, female, English. Those three things are a red rag to a Scottish bull generally. To get all three of them in Vicky was amazing.

Gavin Kostick: And John Tiffany?

Neil Murray: Well, yes. The process was, Vicky got appointed and she then appointed myself and John. She worked with John – John was working in the Traverse, so John was very well known in Scotland, being Associate Director with the Traverse and done a lot of work there. And then Vicky had taken him to Paines Plough, so they'd worked together, then she

brought him on board as Associate Director, specifically to develop the new work element of it. And then me.

Gavin Kostick: And then you. I just want to get a handle on it. With those strong characters, personalities, are you literally in the same building somewhere?

Neil Murray: Same room. Well, me and John in the same room. Kind of like *The Odd Couple*, a bit.

No, we started off in November. Vicky was appointed in July; she started working in November on her own in an office with a mobile phone. That was the National Theatre of Scotland. Atlantic Chambers on Hope Street in Glasgow. It was her with a mobile phone. A year later there were seven of us and we built up until now there are 34 full time staff. Which is still pretty lean, I think.

Gavin Kostick: Let's take a project. Let's talk about a particular project. Let's go with *Black Watch* for example. Something like that. That was a huge thing, and quite right too. Conceptually, though, there you are, the National Theatre of Scotland. A nation, we are a nation now, a mighty nation. How does it work? Who's coming up with the idea, who's commissioning the writer? How is it actually put together?

Neil Murray: *Black Watch* is actually a fantastic story. On their first day – we still have the newspaper to prove it – on Vicky's first day in Glasgow as the Director of the National Theatre of Scotland she bought the Herald, and on the front page it says, Scottish regiments to be amalgamated. That was the front page of it. Which was the British government – not just the Scottish regiments, actually, it happened to a lot of other regiments as well. This notion that in Scotland the military is very localised, so the *Black Watch* particularly came from an area, from Clayton and Tayside where they've always had their soldiers from. We have the Borderers, we have the Highland regiments. And that's been very attractive to people because you fight almost for your area in front of anything. The British government decided that to economise, they were going to amalgamate all the regiments.

Gavin Kostick: Has that happened?

Neil Murray: It's happened, yes, although to be honest, there was so much resistance to it that the *Black Watch* is still called the *Black Watch* even on the television news, in Afghanistan, you still hear the words *Black Watch* in that context.

So that was on the front page of the Herald, and on the inside page, on page three, there's three *Black Watch* soldiers killed in an explosion in Iraq. She just thought, God, that's so incongruous. That they're fighting in this, frankly illegal war, which is what I think we all felt it was at the time, getting killed, and at the same time they're unpicking why they joined up in the first place. She thought, who could write about that. I know, Gregory Burke. It's great, he's from the area in Fife, he's from a military background. And his father was even in Gibraltar for a while. The play *Straits* is based on his childhood.

Gavin Kostick: And that's around when?

Neil Murray: It was around that time he was growing up in Gibraltar.

So she phoned Gregory on literally the first day. I think it was November the 7th, the paper was. She phoned Gregory and said, can you follow what's going on in the *Black Watch*? And he said, I am. That was the start of it, and we didn't know what the project would be. When we started it, we commissioned – pretty much any Scottish writer that had a pulse was commissioned by us. Either to write a play or we did things called assignments where if they didn't know what they wanted, we said, well actually, we'll give you £1,000. Just follow a story for us, and see where it goes. That's what *Black Watch* was. It was an assignment. He wasn't commissioned to write a play.

Gavin Kostick: Right, so he follows the story...

Neil Murray: He followed the story, and as the organisation started to grow, it became clear that it was a much bigger story around Iraq and what was happening there. Myself and John started in April 2005, and by November 2005 we had to announce our first programme. The government we putting massive pressure on us. We were funded directly by the government, rather than by the Arts Council.

Gavin Kostick: How's that working out for you?

Neil Murray: I'll wait until David Parnell [Head of Theatre, Arts Council of Ireland] leaves the room. We'll talk about that separately. It's good. It's alright.

Gavin Kostick: Ok.

Neil Murray: So government said, you've got our money, you need to spend this. Therefore we were kind of bounced into announcing the programme. We would have taken – if we were doing it again, we would have said, give us another year. Although, actually, the thrill and excitement of doing it so quickly is what made it successful initially. But in that initial programme we said, ok we'll put on a show called *Black Watch*. And we announced that we were going to do a show called *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke when there was nothing there.

Gavin Kostick: You had no script.

Neil Murray: No, God, no. It still isn't.

Yes, so Gregory started. We commissioned him before we read the script and – I'll say it because Mike [Griffiths - Traverse] is here. We originally presented the idea to the Edinburgh International Festival and Brian McMaster turned it down because he thought it might be too parochial. So we went to the Traverse, which was fantastic. The Traverse said, yes we'll support it. We found a venue, working with the Traverse, to present it in the Fringe.

But Gregory didn't write a play. What Gregory did was we got researchers and we got a massive amount of documentation and research and Gregory wrote some scenes. For those who saw the play, all the stuff in the pub is Gregory. He's not that writer. He kind of wrote the opposite to himself, although that was him in the pub with those guys.

Gavin Kostick: That's not him in the play in your opinion or is it...

Neil Murray: No it isn't him. I know who it is, but I'm not going to say who it is. Portrait of another artist. The opposite to him. But it was him meeting the soldiers in the pub. He met them every Sunday. They wouldn't let him record anything because they were either still serving or they were on reserve. So what would happen was they would tell stories. He would drink with them all day and he would go to the toilet and write it down every half hour. So he got that material.

Gavin Kostick: Did any of those soldiers see the play?

Neil Murray: Yes, yes. A lot of them did. Most of them did.

Gavin Kostick: What their off the record opinion of ...

Neil Murray: They loved it. They loved it; because I think they felt it was the first time that anybody had told the story of their experiences. They were very proud of it. We had to distance ourselves from them. That was the difficulty. There was a really difficulty of the show being hijacked by the military, almost.

Gavin Kostick: Put it to you differently. Because you're the National Theatre and not the Traverse, so you're saying you oppose the illegal invasion of Iraq. But did you feel that making a show that as the National Theatre you couldn't make a direct statement of that?

Neil Murray: No, you've got to. We thought we could. It's interesting because it goes back to that notion of government, because it was the Labour government, who founded the National Theatre, who created the National Theatre of Scotland. We effectively made a show which pointed a finger at the people who were funding us and said look. There's a scene at the end of the play where you have – it wasn't a Scottish Labour government, but still. In a scene where, you know, pointing a finger at the government. What was interesting was that when *Black Watch* came out, when premiered in August, in the festival in Edinburgh, the Fringe, that the Labour party just refused to come and see it. They never came to see it. Hardly anybody...

Gavin Kostick: Had they been to other shows?

Neil Murray: Yes. We owe them for everything.

Gavin Kostick: So you noted that...

Neil Murray: Yes, we noted that they didn't come to see it. What was interesting was that when the government then changed in 2007 and the Scottish National Party got in, Simon – whatever anyone thinks, he's a brilliant politician – and the first thing he did was he said, to mark the opening of the new parliament we'd like you to do *Black Watch* for the parliament. We kind of agonised about it. We thought, hang on a minute. This is really ... but we thought, actually, we either stand outside and criticise and say they never come and see our work, or when they ask us to do something for them, show them we'll do it. So we said we'll do it. We wouldn't change anything in the show and we'll do it.

But when we did it for the parliament, we did it in this big gymnasium. It was a really bizarre day. The Queen had been in Edinburgh so they'd done the march. As I was travelling over to Edinburgh from Glasgow – in fact we got to the hotel in Edinburgh, we were looking at the TV and it was Sky News or something. It's like an airport on fire. And it was the Glasgow airport, you know the guy driving the car into it. So the whole city was on this ridiculous security alert. And we're doing a show about soldiers being blown up.

Gavin Kostick: I heard – and correct me if I'm wrong – that it was never really designed to tour, so it was a bit of a surprise you tried to make it move.

Neil Murray: No it wasn't designed to tour at all. The set was made for three weeks in a drill hall in Edinburgh. That's what it was made for. It was one of our first projects. It was the third project we'd done. We just wanted to do it in Edinburgh. It was done specifically to be in that venue at that time. We had the military tattoo going on up the hill so we wanted to juxtapose those two things.

Gavin Kostick: I feel morally obliged, because we talked about it right at the start, and we're talking about venues. Let's just have a quick look at *Home*. *Home* was the first one. That was ten different plays, am I right? In ten different places. Were all those theatre venues?

Neil Murray: No, none were at all.

Gavin Kostick: None of those were theatre venues. This is what we're talking about. If I was a member of the public in Scotland, could I have seen all ten?

Neil Murray: No. The most you could have seen, I think, was six. Some only happened once on the same night.

Gavin Kostick: So you're creating work on a large scale like *Drinking Dust* [Junk Ensemble, Dublin] where you can't really see the whole thing at any given time.

Neil Murray: It kind of made us review-proof as well. So it was like, well they can't slag everything off.

Gavin Kostick: How did you manage it? For a start did they buy tickets or were they free?

Neil Murray: Yes, it was fantastic because they were all free. Which helped.

It was a really deliberate choice to start with *Home*. The first thing we did was we launched the theatre on the 26th of February 2006. There was all this initial pressure of people saying, what will they do? Will in be Ewan McGregor playing *Hamlet* at the Royal Lyceum Theatre. No, that's not going to happen.

Gavin Kostick: Mind you, when John Gielgud died and they named the Gielgud Theatre and they said to the guy who directed that, what are you going to do?

Neil Murray: You've thrown me now.

So we didn't want to do it because, well, we didn't know any of those people. We hadn't done anything yet. Why would they come and work with us in the first place? There was a lot of, ohh who's going to be the big stars? We said, what we should do, given that this whole concept of – Emma who was our Press Manager, coined the expression 'theatre without walls' was what where were working with. We thought, well, what would make us truly national to start with? What about if we played ten different shows in ten different locations in Scotland. We invited ten directors to come and talk to us about what they might want to do. We gave them all a budget and said, you've got four weeks. We don't care what you do, but you've got to do something on the 26th of February. That was the only proviso.

Gavin Kostick: One performance only?

Neil Murray: Well, it could be one performance only. Some ran for three or four days. Some were just one. I did one in Edinburgh and that was just one performance. One day, sorry.

Gavin Kostick: More pointedly in the sense that this – the issue of regionality, you had the ten different productions.

Neil Murray: We did one on Stornoway up in the western islands, we did one in Dumfries in the far south, we did one in Dundee in the east, we did Glasgow in the West. We literally looked at the map and said these are the kind of places where we should do it. We tried to find partners in all those places to work with. We did them all on the same night. It felt slightly like that old medieval thing of lighting a beacon on a hill and seeing the next one lighting the next one. That was the idea, that we were lighting beacons around.

Gavin Kostick: I was in London and I was looking at ...

Neil Murray: London, England?

Gavin Kostick: London, England. I had to go tell them what's what about some things, but anyway. They had the plinth with the sculptor, what's his name?

Neil Murray: Gormley.

Gavin Kostick: Gormley. I thought that was alright. And then I went to the National Portrait Gallery and they've got it on video feed, and I realised that that whole thing is not really about the live event. It's about creating an archive of a portrait of England that will be a permanent video installation in the National Portrait Gallery. So with your not being able to see them all, are they archived somewhere? Is there some sort of post-*Home* thing that you can go to to say, oh that was there. No, I just happened?

Neil Murray: Not really. They just happened. It was really just about saying that whatever part of Scotland you live in, hopefully the National Theatre of Scotland will mean something to you. It put down a marker I suppose. We followed that up by going back to those places and more places. There's some ludicrous statistic – who knows if it's true or not – which is something like, no matter where you live in Scotland, you will have been within ten miles of a National Theatre of Scotland production. Even the most remote part of Scotland. We will have been within ten miles of it.

Gavin Kostick: It's like heroin in Ireland, really.

Neil Murray: It's like heroin in Ireland.

Gavin Kostick: There's some statistic about how far away you are. Like rats really. Back to theatre.

Though you haven't the venue, it does mean, I would imagine, you're proudly partnering many institutions and organisations? How are your relationships going with your partner organisations?

Neil Murray: I think pretty well. Pretty well to our face. I've no idea what's said in bars. I can only imagine.

Gavin Kostick: What is the formal relationship? Do you have a formal relationship?

Neil Murray: No, we have an informal relationship with almost every theatre building in Scotland. Because not only are we doing this out of buildings, because a lot of the work we do – in fact in the last year we've kind of slightly retreated indoors and we're getting itchy feet. We're going to do some more weird stuff again. We're doing plays, which is slightly odd. Nothing wrong with the play.

So yes. If I think of the big cities, you know, in Edinburgh we've worked with the Traverse we've worked with the Lyceum, we've worked with the Kings, we've worked with the Festival Theatre in Glasgow. We're about to work with the Tron, which is the first time we've been there.

Gavin Kostick: I suppose the acid test is, you've worked with them, are you going to work with them again? Do you feel like an ongoing relationship? Has anyone gone, no that's enough?

Neil Murray: No, there's always scheduling issues. Can we do it when we want to do it. We're still quite fringe in how we work sometimes. We make decisions quite late often, which may drive people mad. There's also, Vicky and John might literally go away for an afternoon and come back and go, let's do this, and I go, yeah alright, let's do this. Sometimes you have a partner who you can do that with. In fact we did it with the Traverse, which is a really good example. We did a season called *Debuts* where we did three new plays by three unknown writers. What happened was, we just got together a group of writers who we hadn't had a chance to work with, and we worked with them for a week in the theatre. John and Vicky and Dominic Hill from the Traverse were on. And at the end of the week we said, some of these plays are brilliant. We should do them. They came back to the office and said we're going to do them. But because Dominic had a theatre, that meant we could do it in his theatre. So we had that freedom. Often when we have a great idea on our own we go to a theatre and they say, look we'd love to but we're schedule until whenever.

Gavin Kostick: So new writing, I see there is documentation that you commissioned 24 writers. Do you think about, how's your gender balance? And how do you think about voices? Do you think, let's go for disparate voices, or is it more, here's a project, this is a perfect writer for it, or is it a combination? How does that work?

Neil Murray: I think it's quite organic. I don't think we sit down and think we need to cover a whole range of things, but we're kind of blessed at the moment – or we have been certainly I think. There was a slightly golden moment in Scotland when we had David Greig, David Harrower, Zinnie Harris, Iain Heggie. A real clutch of great playwrights. They're now reaching 40 or beyond. They still feel quite young.

Gavin Kostick: Well, playwrights are at their best in their 40s.

Neil Murray: Absolutely. So I hear. But we're always trying to find the voice that's underneath that. So the gender balance has been quite good actually. What's been interesting is that we did a load of commissions but we've hardly produced any of them yet, which is partly

because of the time it takes to deliver that work. They really have been three or four-year gestation periods. And partly because we've had the freedom to say no. Actually we don't want to produce. People have written plays, actually, quite established playwrights and we've said, actually it's not for us. We have the slight luxury of having enough subsidy. Previously in the past when I've commissioned plays at the Tron or wherever, there's a massive pressure. You've spent money, you kind of need to make it work somehow, even if in your heart you think it's terrible. You still do it, you make it happen. We haven't had to do it.

Gavin Kostick: The other institution which is much smaller and is coming to be known is the Playwrights Studio of Scotland, is that right? Now, have you formed a relationship with them?

Neil Murray: They don't commission plays. They develop writers.

Gavin Kostick: That's what I mean. Do they help?

Neil Murray: Yes. I think we've found a way to co-exist happily, and we support them on some of their initiatives. Certainly, some young writers who we wouldn't have found have come through there. I there was definitely a moment of, oh my God, we've just been established and now this has been established. So we were careful to make sure that what we did was different to what they did. So, they've worked more with very much first time writers who we've then had a chance to develop.

Gavin Kostick: In a few minutes I'll open it up to the floor, and there's microphones around, is that right? I think, maybe it's bit cruel. It's very nice to sit here and celebrate success. It's been absolutely amazing...

Neil Murray: It's not all successful. No, I really want to be clear, because I think there is a sense from outside Scotland of, oh my God, how did this happen in three years? Not everything has been successful, and not everything works.

Gavin Kostick: How do you set a learning structure in process? How do you learn with in your own organisation?

Neil Murray: We've learned from co-productions that if you co-produce it isn't good enough to give the money and let them spend it and come back with a show. Sometimes that hasn't worked. We've learned that, just because we can give bigger budgets than they're used to, that's actually a danger as well as an opportunity. People can panic. They rehearse for six weeks and they get bored and the show kind of fizzles out before you even get to the stage. So yes, I think we have learned from those mistakes. I think on the whole, you know, if you'd said - because it's only three and a half years that we've been producing - if you had said this is what you would have done, we would have bitten your hand off. But there is a big sense that there are things we haven't achieved. Well, I think we haven't ...

Gavin Kostick: Well, that leads me to the future then. What do you want? What's the hunger for now?

Neil Murray: I think where we haven't succeeded is, we haven't managed to crack the really big, large-scale theatre project.

Gavin Kostick: You mean like a big show?

Neil Murray: A big popular show, yes.

Gavin Kostick: Are you going for it with the Glasgow version of *The House of Bernarda Alba*?

Neil Murray: *The House of Bernarda Alba* is never going to be a big popular show. If we get 500 people a night it's fantastic. We're packed out. I'm talking about, can we find a piece of popular culture and turn it into something that's really - that the people who won't go and see theatre will go to ...

Gavin Kostick: Neil Gaiman is the graphic designer, as I'm sure you all know. He's the most popular Neil in the world.

Neil Murray: He's the most googled Neil in the world. I was the second most googled Neil for days. He put me in his google. It's true. He's so arrogant, he phoned me and said you're the second most googled Neil in the world.

Gavin Kostick: Is that the way to do it? He's huge.

Neil Murray: He did *The Wolves in the Walls*. That was our first show after *Home*, we did *The Wolves in the Walls* and that got a really great audience. The one that got us our biggest theatre audience, sheer volume of numbers was we did John Byrne's *Tutti Frutti*. Made Robbie Coltraine and Emma Thompson. Went on to be a star.

In Scotland *Tutti Frutti* touched such a nerve. It was everybody's favourite programme. Although if you watch it now it's six hours or a programme that is so leisurely. One of them is a half hour walk through the Glasgow School of Art. You'd never get away with it now. It would have been a 90-minute special if you were lucky. But we did that in big theatres and packed out. More people saw that than have seen *Black Watch*, still, in Scotland. In two weeks.

Gavin Kostick: So they have good viewing and lots of people can see them and you have the equipment to make things work. Whereas you do these amazing signature pieces and God knows how many ...

Neil Murray: Four people. No, I think it's the balance. I think we haven't managed to do that again, and we want to do it on our terms. The great thing about *Tutti Frutti*, although the production wasn't brilliant, it worked well, but not brilliantly – it just felt like that was a really great thing to do. John Byrne has a real old kind of cultural weight in Scotland. We haven't managed to find another project like that. That's the challenge for us.

Gavin Kostick: There's a tip for you. If anyone's got a big, fat stage filler.

Neil Murray: So we haven't done that as well. And I think some of our partnerships, co-production partnerships haven't always been brilliant. When other organisations have led on shows it hasn't been as good as one we've just done on our own. We have to get that to get better at that.

Gavin Kostick: Is there another side to that story where they might say ... You don't have to answer that.

We're going to open it to the floor perhaps. Tom is up there, from *Druid*. Questions for Neil please.

Audience 1 [Thomas Conway – Druid]: Morning. I want to ask you, Neil, the thing that we admire about the National Theatre of Scotland is all the barriers you seem to break through. Things that we might fear. It didn't need a venue. It didn't need a Scottish Artistic Director. I'm kind of curious how many other barriers you break down. You could support an ecology that seems to be very strong already. Are you very elastic with your definition of what is Scottish, let's say, or what is a Scottish artist or who are the artists that you would support?

Neil Murray: Yes.

Audience 1 [Thomas Conway – Druid]: Who do you support? Do you have to have a Scottish passport or can you ...

Neil Murray: A Scottish dog. If you've a Highland terrier you're in.

No, we started off and the first year especially we really made a political decision to really concentrate on Scottish artists or artists living in Scotland, particularly. I think we've started

to extend that now. I think, in the end what we've learned is that people just want to see the work. The main thing for us, the overriding thing is that the work has to happen in Scotland. I think we got slightly star-struck last year. We did a lot of international work. And people started to go ooh, get them and their Lincoln Centre ways. It was fantastic, and we're reigning that back in, although we kind of missing it again now, so we'll produce some more foreign travel.

But the main thing has been – I think the biggest barrier we've broken down is letting people see the work all over Scotland. I think the best single thing we did, strangely, the biggest success was when we first started I remember going to a meeting of rural presenters and small-scale presenters. We were saying what can we do, how can we come to you and make a difference to you and your audience and they said bring raked seating. That was their argument. Bring raked seating. We built this little – we have a structure which we call the ensemble structure, whereby we take out two shows a year. It's in the round. It's 100 seats raked on four sides, and we transform a village hall into a theatre for a couple of nights. We do a children's show and we do a grown up's show and we do...

Gavin Kostick: As a National Theatre, do you produce children's work is there. Do you have a conscious children's strand? How does that work?

Neil Murray: There's a lot of people in Scotland making great work for children. In the infrastructure at the moment, so we kind of just tap into that. It's not – we need to do three children's shows a year. There are people like Catherine Wheels, and Tony Reekie at Imagine. There's a lot of really good work coming out of that.

So the ensemble takes one of those pieces, and then we take – so for the first year we did Zinnie Harris's *Miss Julie*, we did Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* as part of the ensemble. We've just done *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* by Liz Lochhead.

Gavin Kostick: She's still writing?

Neil Murray: Yes. Still commissioned. Hasn't delivered but she was commissioned.

Gavin Kostick: In Ireland they're clamouring for touring.

Neil Murray: But that tour is amazing because that tour was to really small communities. It gives them work as well as they can see in Glasgow or Edinburgh. This is what we say to them. You're getting exactly the same in your village hall in Cromarty or wherever. At the moment, what we've found even at that is that people have started to say to us, it's still too big for us, it's still too big. That can't fit in our village hall. The logical conclusion is that we'll end up doing the phone box tour.

Gavin Kostick: Shows in post offices.

Neil Murray: We've now responded to that as well by saying we'll come up with another strand. So we've come up with the idea very lately called Dogma theatre, which is we'll just do a show in a hall. And Vicky Featherstone is currently on Orkney as we speak about to open a show there on Monday, called *Long Gone Lonesome* by Duncan McLean about a Scottish musician who kind of reinvented, rediscovered western swing music on Orkney, which we're about to open. That's doing a three-week tour round really small communities in the Highlands and islands. I think the biggest barrier to be broken down is that the National Theatre can have the best artists. We put as much credence on that as we do on the work in Edinburgh and Glasgow. That's our biggest barrier. I think there's no other barrier for us. As long as the work is in Scotland that's good enough for us.

Audience 1 [Thomas Conway – Druid]: I'll follow through on that then. The thing that we notice about the National Theatre of Scotland is your informality and flexibility, that you maintain that at all costs it seems. Is that something that you're conscious in retaining as part of your identity, as part of your core identity?

Neil Murray: I think we're terrified of being an institution. That terrifies us, the thought of it.

I think that's because we all came from a kind of a fringe background. None of us had really done those big jobs. We were all kind of ridiculously inexperienced, in as sense, to do it.

Audience 1 [Thomas Conway – Druid]: And you retain that flexibility even in terms of how you distribute the money, or how you think about money? You're not ring fencing budgets for different projects?

Neil Murray: No. On the first week I was there – we get just around £4 million pounds a year from the Scottish government, so that's our budget. The first week I was there, me and Vicky sat down and said, God, let's just do a quick budget. What we said was that something like, of that £4 million, £2 million of that had to be preserved as the subsidy of the work. We had to preserve that amount of subsidy. We've managed to do that, and then increase that so that last year, when the turnover was £6 million, £4 million was on the work. Which is great. 70% ends up on stage, or in our learning department. It's not infrastructure. The infrastructure, the salary bill has gone up.

Gavin Kostick: Are you allowed to roll money over from one year to the other? Or do you have to go down to zero?

Neil Murray: We're allowed a certain amount of reserve. But not much. 10% of our budget.

Gavin Kostick: So if you under spend...?

Neil Murray: We'll never under spend again. There are so many projects.

Gavin Kostick: You mentioned to me outside that you reckon, though, that the Scotland situation is going down, that they are cuts?

Neil Murray: Well, yes. There was a budget announcement last week from the British government which was a lot more optimistic for the arts than people had feared. We'd been told to expect anything between 5% and 8% cut from the government and it didn't happen, which is fantastic. So I think there's an election looming and I think the government say culture is important for who we are so therefore we have to try and preserve it. We've got a new Culture Minister who I think is, of all the people we've had – we've had a ton of them already – I think he shows the most commitment. Credit to him because he's an artist himself, or has been.

Audience 2 [Jim Culleton – Fishamble]: Thanks very much. I was just wondering if you could go back to the point that the National Theatre of Scotland is funded directly by the government and not by the Arts Council, because that's different, obviously, than our situation here where our National Theatre is funded by the Arts Council whereas most other national cultural institutions aren't. Maybe you could just share with us what you think the good or bad things about that are?

Neil Murray: Well, we kind of had no choice, to be honest. What happened was, it's quite a new initiative. Previously everybody had been funded by the Arts Council, but the year before we came into fruition the other national organisations, the opera, ballet and the two orchestras were moved across to the government, so we were kind of moved with them when we came in. I think, this probably unfair because they aren't here to defend themselves, but they all have quite big deficits and I think the government helped them with that. But their reward was to say, right, we're going to look after you know. We're going to do that and we're going to look after you.

Then we came in, and to be honest, we would not have chosen that, because we naturally belonged with all the other theatre companies, whereas there is only one opera company in Scotland. There is only one classical ballet company. So they didn't have that relationship with the wider world that we have. We were specifically being, almost formed by those companies. They were the voices who created us, saying we'll have a national company who will work with all of us. So we were kind of slightly moved away. But, actually it hasn't affected us in how we work with the companies who are still with the Arts Council.

I have to say the relationship with the government has been better than we would ever have thought. They've never impinged on our programme. They've never actually said about the work you do, about the breadth of work. The quality is the only thing they talk about. The quality of the work we do. We've been really lucky in that we've had a government who've been quite astute and have seconded people from within the theatre infrastructure to work with the National Theatre. The delightful Mike Griffiths is going to be working for the government in that role now on a secondment. So we have people like Mike where you think, you know you can talk to them. They know our world. There's a shortcut. And then occasionally you hit the bureaucracy of the top level of government, but that doesn't really intervene on us.

Gavin Kostick: Tell me about dance, are you saying there are no ballet companies other than the National Ballet?

Neil Murray: There's Scottish Dance Theatre and then small-scale independent companies.

The Scottish Ballet is, or certainly was, the classical bastion. It's slightly changed over the last few years. But I'm sure the Scottish Ballet do not have the same relationship with those small companies that the National Theatre of Scotland has with Vanishing Point or has with Catherine Wheels, who we see all the time. We talk to all the time. Our natural home is with those companies. We fought very hard to find a way to keep that alive through various networks, through the Federation of Scottish Theatre, which we're a member of, along with the other companies. I don't think people feel as though we're a remote organisation like NSB. I think we're kind of closer on the ground a bit.

Audience 3 [Caitriona Ni Mhurchu]: Hi. I just really would like to know whether you have a language remit or what is the vibrancy of the Gaelic language playwright? How is that worked, or has it worked at all, or is it something you're in partnership with?

Gavin Kostick: Just to make you happy, Caitriona, my dad went to the west of Scotland.

Audience 3 [Caitriona Ni Mhurchu]: I'm happy just to look at you Gavin, it's fine.

Gavin Kostick: He went away to Scotland and he hadn't done Irish since he was at school and he found it all came back to him. The Scots Gaelic on the west coast was perfectly intelligible to him and he was having conversations in Gaelic that he hadn't had for 50 years. So I said, is that the real deal or is that school Gaelic? He said no, that's a strong tradition in there. How are you doing on the language?

Audience 3 [Caitriona Ni Mhurchu]: No I'm just genuinely interested. Is there a vibrancy there?

Neil Murray: We don't have a language remit. It's not stated in our remit at all. However, we've tried to engage. There's not a particularly strong Gaelic theatre movement. *[unclear]*.

Gavin Kostick: Is there a storytelling tradition?

Neil Murray: There's a storytelling and a massive music tradition

Audience 3 [Caitriona Ni Mhurchu]: Big poetry tradition.

Neil Murray: That's why we've done a show on Orkney. But we've lot of work, we've been living in Orkney for the last year it seems, with the project we did up there. But we've just commissioned our first Gaelic writer. We're going to do a bilingual Gaelic/English play. We've just done that. But strangely we've come under no pressure either. There's been no criticism or pressure from it, whereas for the National Theatre of Wales, I think, it's much more of a live issue. The language is growing and developing there, whereas in Scotland it isn't actually. Although it's starting to see the first hints of that middle class sending their children to Gaelic school culture starting.

Gavin Kostick: Wales is, I believe, bilingual and they've had big arguments about it, so the road signs are in English.

Neil Murray: They are. All of them are.

Gavin Kostick: Scotland, like that or not like that?

Neil Murray: Not like that. You know, airports and railway stations. Basically for the photographs.

Gavin Kostick: How are we for time Jen?

Jen Coppinger [Irish Theatre Institute]: About ten minutes.

Gavin Kostick: Great. More questions, then, from the floor.

Audience 1 [Thomas Conway – Druid]: I'm so curious. The 28 commissions that you first had, and your blanket commissioning – is that a good policy? It's not always a good policy. What is your strike rate in terms of the amount of plays that get produced from your commissions?

Neil Murray: I think it was a good policy at the time because it just gave an opportunity to all those writers with us. We want you to write a play for us, we're not going to time-pressure you. It might lead to commission. But they are only now coming to fruition. We're just doing a Rona Munro play. That was one of the first plays we commissioned. That took us a while. Rona wrote it quite quickly. That was about casting about getting Siobhan Redmond, waiting until Siobhan was available. We're about to do a new play by Douglas Maxwell, which was one of those first commissions, so that's come through now.

I don't know if it's been successful yet because we haven't done enough of the stuff. I think we'll know in two or three year's time. There's a kind of second wave now, and what we try to do is we budget that we can commission ten new plays a year. That we have the money to give ten commissions a year. Sometimes it's more, sometimes it's less, but that's the kind of benchmark.

Gavin Kostick: We're here on the set of Gina Moxley's *The Crumb Trail*. A Pan Pan production. They are a very self-conscious theatre company in a very interesting way. We're in Project Arts Centre.

Gina Moxley [from audience]: It's self-conscious.

Gavin Kostick: The point is, I'm just curious, if we have a bit of time at the end, to what extent, if any, do you think about contemporary development in drama worldwide? Do you look at post-dramatic theatre? Do you think about deconstruction? Do you think of other forms? Does that impinge on your aesthetic at all, or is it just about...

Neil Murray: For us it's just about, what's the best way to tell the story we want to tell. It sounds really glib, but obviously we see a lot of theatre, we see a lot of international theatre. We have, you know, we are working with some international artists. It's very interesting to us. In the past year we've kind of slightly become rooted in the theatre again, more, and we want to edge away from that. The projects we're looking at, we're looking to do a project with a motorcycle wall of death. With a family telling their story, but using the wall of death structure. We are honestly. Buggers the insurance as well. We're talking to Helen Marriage, in London. She produced the Royal Deluxe *Sultan's Elephant* project, about doing a really big outdoor, looking at Glasgow's industrial past, making it based on a children's book.

Gavin Kostick: When I think about it in terms of other productions of yours, *Architecting*, that was with the TEAM from New York. How's that gone for you?

Neil Murray: It's been fantastic. TEAM have been in the Traverse for a couple of years at the festival, and they were just there when we were there, and we drank with them in the Traverse bar and said we should work together.

Gavin Kostick: So that's a New York company.

Neil Murray: It's a New York company, but what we did, we had Davey Anderson was our Associate Director on a bursary for two years, and Davey had done the music for *Black Watch*. We said we'd love to do something with you, but what's our – rather than give you money for a show – what's our in to this? So Davey went to New York and worked on it, and co-directed it with her. We brought it back and did it in the Traverse.

Gavin Kostick: Just remind me and everyone. It's based on another script that they've self-consciously...

Neil Murray: It's *Gone With The Wind*. We wanted to bring it to Dublin. We wanted to bring it to Dublin and we really tried hard and the timing was just wrong. We're doing it in Glasgow and we're doing it in the Barbican in London and we're doing it in a festival in Lisbon. We're hoping that something else will come out of the work [*unclear*] who are really fantastic. A slightly young company. It's interesting for us because we've made work in a different way working with them. They work in this completely New York downtown way where if you get more than £10 you're the richest theatre artist in the world. So they were slightly astonished that we pay them. So we don't. We do, we do.

Yes, so I think we're always looking at – I'll just rattle on about the things we're doing. We got in touch with Pol Heyvaert who is an amazing artist, who wrote, devised and directed *Aalst*, which I think came to Dublin a couple of years ago. We did our own version of *Aalst* as well then. Pol directed it with Scottish actors. We're doing a new show with him that he's going to direct for us with a disabled actor called Robert Softley in Scotland. Pol is fearless in how he directs work so that's going to be really interesting I suspect.

Audience 4 [Roise Goan – Dublin Fringe Festival]: I was just going to ask – I think maybe I know the answer to this question already, but I think people would like to know – when you talk about the things that you do with companies like the TEAM or working with Pol Heyvaert or thinking about how you're going to travel and move, is that led by policies that you write down, or are you able to work in a way where you don't have to do that? How does that relationship work in terms of how much you have to tell people what you're going to do, and write down a policy, or how much can you just respond and go with it?

Neil Murray: We respond and go with it. We write it down once we know we're doing it.

Gavin Kostick: The National Theatre of Scotland has an amazing foundation. Is this a golden age of Scottish theatre?

Neil Murray: Well, not a golden age, but it would be a shame to miss the genesis of it, so we are archiving it quite fastidiously.

Gavin Kostick: So Roise will one day go to look up the...

Neil Murray: Roise will one day be able to look at the board minutes where the board say, I didn't know we were doing a wall of death show. After the visual artist we worked with has killed himself on the wall of death.

Audience 5 [Orla Flanagan – Fishamble]: Neil, I'm just wondering about your responsibility, if you feel you have one, to emerging artists as opposed to established artists, and how that relationship works? And my second question, which is a bit of a big one, is how do you see the National Theatre of Scotland growing in the future? Is it upwards or outwards?

Gavin Kostick: That's where we were going in the end. Your statement in the end. Where's the National Theatre going?

Neil Murray: No, we absolutely have a responsibility for emerging artists. I think we've worked quite closely with people and set up various schemes. We have what we call Associates. Anybody of a certain age [sings a tune]. It's not going to mean anything over here.

Gavin Kostick: It's a great gag in Scotland.

Neil Murray: So we'd have associates who are always fledgling artists, so we have three working with us currently. In fact one of them is Linda Radley, who's an Irish artist from Cork. Linda's working with us at the moment on a project. We started actually – we were ill conceived at first. One of the things we got completely wrong was that we tried to create what we called the Young Company. It was kind of like a boy band. It was like X Factor. We thought these guys are great, put them in a band and they'll be brilliant. We decided we've got to kind of be Oasis and come up naturally. So we stopped doing that. What we now do is bring artists into the company and they work with us. We've got a couple of writers. A couple of choreographers, writers, actors as well. I think we do have a responsibility.

Gavin Kostick: Just to finish up, if you don't mind Orla, turning the question on its head in a sense. When we come back in three years time and if any good luck we'll sit down for our three year catch up. What will you be telling us about? What will you be saying the next part of the story has been, do you think?

Neil Murray: I think it'll bed down. I'm slightly embarrassed to be talking about it in front of all the people I know and have known for a long time in this room. I keep waiting for the word 'fraud' to be shouted out. I was going to strop out if anybody did. I think after three years, I think three years is very young. If you think, if you've created companies for yourself, after three years you're just starting to get going. I think we're now really bedding down in the sense that we've started to get a better infrastructure in Glasgow. We've got a rehearsal room of our own, quite close to where we are so we're not all dispersed everywhere. You won't see us in a theatre, ever, with a building. I'm not saying with the people running it currently. Maybe in 20 years time that will change. But that is absolutely what we want and what we strive for.

I hope you will have see a couple of really – I hope *Black Watch* will still be part of our story, and not as big a part of the story, because I think its – people said, oh my God, that must be a curse. I'm like, are you kidding? After three years it's nothing, it's nothing. If you'd said you'd have show that made that impact, I'd have bitten your arm off. I still hope it'll be part of the story, but not as big a part of the story.

I hope we'll have been seen in Ireland more, amongst other places. But I don't think the model will change in that period. I think at the moment we're working on a structure that we can produce around 12 or 16 new pieces of work a year, which is a lot of work. I don't know if we can do any more than that. We'll die if we do more than that. But I hope we'll keep doing that amount of work, and keep working our repertoire, and still kind of be interesting.

Gavin Kostick: Great. Well, Neil Murray, thank you very much indeed.