

THIRTY YEARS OF DRIP ACTION

(With apologies to William MacGonagall)

SIMON BRETT 10/12/17



'Twas in the year of nineteen-hundred-and-eighty-seven,
Which will be remembered as long as there's a Loch at Lochleven.
And if you dinna remember it, you'd have to be a zombie,
There was a meeting in an Arundel pub that was called the General Abercrombie.
(What I should tell all people for whom such information carries weight is:
The pub was turned into hoosing some time in the nineteen-eighties.)
Anyway, one of the people there was a gentleman called Chris Warren,
And the other one was called... ach, it's written on a piece of paper in my sporran.
Anyway, the two fitted together like a mortise and tenon,
And - oh yes, the other gentleman was called Bill Brennan.
They were discussing plays and Bill, as he struck the tabletop hard,
Said he particularly liked one written by a playwright called Tom Stoppard.
It's called,' he went on, '*Artist Descending a Staircase*,
And for putting it on,' said Bill, 'I could make a fair case.'
Said Chris, 'One problem. I'm afraid he - oh -
Actually wrote the play for radio.'
'Well,' said Bill, let's contact Tom's agent,
And ask if he'd let us do it on stage.' 'N' t -
Oo cut a long story short - if the ground you keep your ear ter,
You'll realise that was the beginning of Drip Action Theatre.

So 'twas in the year of nineteen-hundred-and-eighty-seven -
Which will be remembered as long as there are stars in the heaven -
That Drip Action made a start
In an upstairs room of a public hoose called the White Hart,
Which was where would the performances of that play by Tom be -
Not far from the aforementioned General Abercrombie.
At doing exciting plays Drip Action soon became a trail-blazer,
With works by Brian Friel, Stefan Zweig and Yasmina Reza.
Peter Nichols and Graham Greene were also on the books -
Along with Berthold Brecht, Athol Fugard, Michael Frayn, Joanna Murray-Smith, Anthony
Minghella, John Byrne, Rona Munro... and Vanessa Brooks.
And new venues were used for Drip Action drama -
Like a splendid summer barn - thanks to a South Stoke farmer.
Plays were done in pubs and hotels - and they had to check no one was missin',
When they left after a performance which had been done at Ford Prison.
And for a celebration, Bill would shop around, but didn't have to shop hard.
The simple solution always was: 'Do another Stoppard.'
And when something went wrong - or proved too much of a slog,
Bill would always pop in another production of *Dead Dad Dog*.

Then the Boat Plays were terrific -
And gave a whole new meaning to the expression 'site specific'.
Putting audiences on a boat - or on the towpath he'd pack um in -
With Bill showing his customary commercial acumen.

To make money from theatre, if you think about it soberly.
You have to write something that will be successful globally.
And on any river in the world you can put on Bill's shows...
So long as it had the same curves as the Arun and the same tidal flows.
It was round this time that Drip Action went international,
To start doing plays translated from the French seemed entirely rational.
And other Drip Action productions were put on,
In association with the Comedie de Caen.
Pet't Albert was put on in France, and in those pre-Brexit days
It seemed natural that its author, Jean-Marie Frin, should appear here in one of the Boat Plays.
And connoisseurs of theatre still feel an afterglow
From the way he enunciated his one line: 'Hein, capitayne, dead bowdy on the port bo.'

Though Drip Action was now established – which had always been the intention –
That didn't mean that they'd begun to run out of invention.
A Theatre Trail was added to the festival menus –
Eight different new plays in eight different venues.
And the process of those plays' acquisition
Has noo become an international competition.
The venues yearly become more diffuse,
And have included every room – and the garden – in John and Sue Marsh's hoose.
Incidentally, one of the major complaints about the Festival that people have told us
Is: 'It's really hard to get a season ticket for the Theatre Trail – they're like gold dus',

And now to the annual thrills have been added the Christmas Sevens,
Seven wee plays which yesterday transported their audience to the heavens.
Actually, 'Christmas Sevens' sounds like rugby to the average duffer...
And, weel, there are similarities, but the plays are considerably rougher.

Noo a word about the Victoria Institute, whose facilities we're enjoying today.
There have been many attempts to improve it, and maybe sometime someone will find a way.
But, please, no talk of closures, and no talk of demolitions.
Many of us have happy memories of this place, in spite of the conditions.
And what other theatre venue in the world, from Samarkand to Spain's got
That distinctive aroma, suggesting that, some months ago, someone died behind the wainscot?
And has any venue in the world but the Vic, this venue that we're praising,
Witnessed more theatrical examples of fluffs and prompts, missed cues and paraphrasing?
But also these black walls – though they smell of the embalmer –
Have witnessed many years of thought-provoking drama.
So I'm here tae say thanks to everyone who's helped blow up the Drip Action bubble...
Though Drip Action has other meanings to those who've had prostate trouble.
But at wearing away at stones, Bill, you've always been sae clever.
So here's tae you, Bill Brennan – may your Action Drip forever!