

THORA written by David McNeish (World Premiere)



16th May 2023

Orkney Theatre, Kirkwall Grammar School, The Meadows, Kirkwall,
Orkney KW15 1QN

16 June 2023, 2.30pm & 7.30pm

17 June 2023, 4pm

Without the remarkable actions of Thora, the mother of Magnus, the cult of St Magnus, the mighty cathedral and even the St Magnus International Festival would not exist. David McNeish's new play brings **Thora** to the fore, a name mentioned in the sagas but about whom little is known.

The story of the Orkney Islands revolves around St Magnus. Here, in her old age, **Thora** tells of her own life and its intersection with the story of her son before and after his martyrdom: the hardships, the violence, the duty and the pain. The resulting play is an intense, powerful and poetic two hander which adds a new dimension to this familiar story.

After her award-winning film for the Festival, *The Storm Watchers*, Gerda Stevenson returns to direct this exciting new drama. While at St Magnus Festival, she will also launch her third poetry collection *Tomorrow's Feast*, a tribute to families everywhere, who will inherit the global legacy of climate change, war and migration.

David McNeish was inspired to write **Thora**, his first full-length play, by Kristin Linklater. An Orkney based, renowned voice coach, Kristin played Thora in an opera by Ron Ferguson and Gemma McGregor previously performed at St Magnus Festival (2017). Ron and Kristin had hoped to collaborate but when their respective commitments prevented it, Kristin turned to David to help bring the character she had created to life. The part was originally written for her, however she sadly died just weeks after its completion.

David said *"I was inspired to explore this formidable woman, light on her feet and capable of incredible diplomacy in the face of personal tragedy, in a society which was often awful to women – violent, misogynistic and patriarchal. Listening to the stories around me, I felt that Thora could speak very powerfully to our present communities. Thora imagines what life had been like before losing her son, to give her the confidence and cunning she needed to navigate the deadly intrigues of court. I'm so grateful for the support of the St Magnus Festival in bringing Thora to life. She must have been incredible, and this play seeks to redress the balance by giving her centre stage."*

The role of **Thora** is played by **Isabella Jarrett** (NTS, Royal Lyceum Theatre, Pitlochry Festival Theatre, Magnetic North, Dundee Rep and film work) and **Magnus** by **Simon Donaldson** (Tron, Raw Material, Traverse, Oran Mor, Communicado, Vox Motus, alongside radio, tv and film). **Young Thora** (a non-speaking role), is played by Eleanor Dean, who also appeared in the George Mackay Brown film *The Storm Watchers*. The set is designed by **Jessica Brettle**, and lighting by **Laura Hawkins**.

David, who moved from Glasgow to Orkney in 2015, has always written while studying medicine, working in lobbying for Citizen Advice Bureau and becoming Minister of Milestone Church in Dounby, Orkney. This is his first professional production. His second, *The BoyWho Thought He Could Swim*, has been commissioned by An Tobar and Mull Theatre and Unlimited, for completion in summer 2024.

Thora is imbued with music, including a Norwegian lullaby, and song settings of texts from the Orkneying Saga, composed and performed by cellist Clea Friend.

Director of Thora, Gerda Stevenson said: *"It's a huge pleasure to be collaborating with the St Magnus International Festival again – such a unique event, its international programme always relevant to the times we inhabit, producing art of the highest quality, while remaining deeply connected to its own community. What a joy to back in Orkney, one of my favourite places in the world. And to be directing a powerful new play, rooted in history but connecting with our own times. Thora is about things that matter to everyone – family, love, death, war and peace, immigration (Thora is an immigrant from Norway), religion, and violence against women. It's a miniature epic, you might say! I'm honoured to be directing a company of such wonderful artists, and humbled by the amazing input from Orkney's skilled volunteers, who give their time so generously."*

Festival Director Alasdair Nicolson said: *"I'm delighted to be bringing David McNeish's new play to the stage in what will be his first professional production as a writer. The story of Magnus has always been central to Orkney but, as with many women in history, his mother is only mentioned by name in passing. The new play is a beautifully poetic and fiercely intense drama which continues the Festival's ethos of bringing exciting new work to the fore."*

Representing each collective is Neil McGuire and Andy Summers for the Architecture Fringe, Kristina Enberg, Amy McEwan, Aoife Nolan, Alissar Riachi for *ism* magazine, and Alyesha Choudhury, Carl C.Z. Jonsson and Mia Pinder-Hussein for */other* (pronounced: slash other).

Exhibition participants include Dele Adeyemo, Prof. Donna Heddle, Aaron McCarthy, Frank McElhinney, Dr. Mairi McFadyen, Hamshya Rajkumar, Raghnaid Sandilands, and Dr. Amanda Thomson. Exhibition collaborators are Simon Forsythe for Lateral North, and Ann Louise Kieran for North Lanarkshire Council.

Visitor experience

Situated adjacent to the dock with open views to the canal and city beyond, the exhibition is arranged into four distinct areas with visitors being gently guided through the landscapes of Loch Ness, Orkney, and Ravenscraig before reaching the reading room and project lexicon.

Each landscape is introduced through chosen words and language with a bespoke research wall of archive and contemporary imagery, printed materials and artefacts. Large-scale monitors display specially commissioned films presenting the landscapes through poetic audio and moving image with contributions from the curatorial teams and exhibition participants.

The creative responses to the questions posed by A Fragile Correspondence are displayed throughout the exhibition and include artworks, photography, sculpture, installation work, film, audio and sound. Materials used within the exhibition's presentation reflect aspects of the various landscapes in focus with timber supporting the work exploring Loch Ness, straw and a palette of natural materials helping to frame Orkney, and an emphasis on metalwork and the reflection of heat contextualising Ravenscraig.

A Fragile Correspondence culminates in the reading room which hosts the project lexicon and hosts a digital touchscreen interface where visitors are invited to interact with the text and resources to contribute their own words and descriptions for place, land and landscapes that are important to them.

Amanda Catto, Head of Visual Arts for Creative Scotland and Chair of the Scotland + Venice partnership, commented: "We are excited to see the distinctive work of the teams at Architecture Fringe, *ism* and /other come together to showcase Scotland's dynamic thinking and creative excellence at La Biennale di Venezia. Taking audiences on a journey through the land and languages of Scotland, A Fragile Correspondence asks important questions about how we can learn from the past to reset our relationship with the natural world into the future. Responding to Lesley Lokko's themes for La Biennale, the Scotland + Venice exhibition has been carefully designed to nurture new connections and spark opportunities for cultural exchange at one of the most significant platforms for Architecture in the world."

Andy Summers, Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Architecture Fringe said: "The exhibition explores the site of the former Ravenscraig Steelworks, which at the time of its closure in 1992 was the largest hot strip steel mill in Western Europe. Ravenscraig's current industrial landscape is commonly perceived through binary understandings of being between somewhere and nowhere, where its authentic contemporary state is often unseen. Our work here recognises Ravenscraig as a place of authenticity and value, as a resurgent natural landscape full of memory and stories. By looking differently we can start to see and recognise its future as a potential community asset – a site of leisure and environmental rebalancing."

Co-founder of /other Carl C.Z. Jonsson has said: "The first of the three sites that visitors will explore in the Collateral Event space is the forest landscape surrounding Loch Ness. Images and associations conjured by the famous loch belie a complex reality of land ownership and extraction, that through time has evolved from the Highland Clearances to the farming of non-native tree species. The work of the Abriachan Forest Trust has provided the starting point for a reckoning with this reality, allowing us to explore alternative ways of seeing the land of this area that we hope will outlast the reductive and romanticised idea of the Highlands."

Aoife Bláthnaid Nolan, Editor-in-Chief of -ism magazine, added: "It's the people we have met in each location that contributed to this impact. Prof. Donna Heddle, director of UHI Institute for Northern Studies in Orkney unveiled to us the perpetual awareness that Orcadians have of their natural environment. Their day-to-day lives are intertwined with forces of nature, due to their exposed island landscape. Despite persistent tidal issues such as coastal erosion and flooding, they have learned to adapt to these through community means; an attitude Orcadians have since pre-history. Which sits alongside Aaron McCarthy, with work that positions language at the centre of Orkney's vast sea and sky, questioning what happens when we attempt to engage a historical and extinct language with modern minds."

This will be the twentieth commission by the Scotland + Venice partnership (Creative Scotland, British Council Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland, Architecture and Design Scotland, V&A Dundee and the Scottish Government).

Since its founding in 2003, Scotland + Venice has been committed to delivering a learning and professional development programme, creating opportunities for over 150 students and early career practitioners to experience La Biennale and the international world of contemporary art first-hand. In 2023 the PDP programme also includes participants from organisations involved in the exhibition. Each participant is located in Venice for a four-week period, working together and undertaking research based on their professional or academic interests. With funding from Architecture and Design Scotland, with support from the British Council Scotland. The PDP programme participants are backed by 11 colleges and organisations.