
**Educational Support Notes
Higher Drama Unit 1
Contemporary Scottish Theatre**

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To accompany the publication by Capercaillie Books of

Stephen Greenhorn's

The Salt Wound
and
Dissent

These notes have been written with the aim of supporting teachers and students in the study of Contemporary Scottish Theatre (Unit 3, Higher Drama), in accordance with the SQA's Arrangements Document, seventh edition, published March 2004. As we go to press, SQA are undertaking another review of this Unit and certain elements may well change in the future. Any teacher or student using these notes as an aid to the study of Higher Drama should bear this in mind and first consult the most up-to-date edition of the Arrangements.

The Salt Wound

§1 Introduction

Stephen Greenhorn's 1994 play, written for 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland), examines 'a small fishing village on the northern edge of Europe'. It is, however, easily located in northern Scotland through its use of language and dialect. The play makes use of Scots dialect throughout

*'A wee bit sad';
'the fishing's no place for a boy like you';
'Aye, it'll be different, alright'; '
This wee lassie's just danced me off ma feet'.*

Greenhorn clearly sees this story as one which could easily travel to other remote fishing communities across northern Europe. In this way, though placing it in Scotland, its social, political and religious dimensions are intended to be universal.

The ostensible driving force of the play is simply Michael's desire to know 'the whole story' of his family. What actually drives the play is the slow, peeling away of the shell Brigit has built in order to shield herself from her true involvement in the death of her son and the break-up of her family.

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§2 Social, Political and Religious Dimensions

(1) Social background and conditions

On a social and political level, Greenhorn depicts an industry in decline. The fishing stocks are low, fewer people are involved in it and less money is made from it.

BRIGIT *There's no future in it, Sam. It's dying. It's been dying for twenty years. You know that.*
SAM *As long as folk want fish, there'll be work for fishermen.*
BRIGIT *Maybe. But not for many. And not for us. Bigger boats. Bigger harbours. Bigger markets. That's where it's headed. And they'll all be fighting over fewer and fewer fish. Everything's changing, Sam. Thomas and Mary are going to live in a different world from the one we know. I'm not saying it's right but it's the way it is.*

The play is set not only in a remote community but, stretching the symbolic nature of the setting even further, in a remote house on the edge of this remote community. Brigit, the play's centre, is therefore seen as an isolated figure through this use of setting. Her isolation, though, is not merely through this location; her isolation is further emphasised by her inability to have contact with the outside world. At the beginning of the play we might, as an audience, believe her to have been isolated by others; by the end of the play we understand her, in addition, to have constructed a form of self-isolation.

In terms of social conditions and expectations, Brigit sees working in the bank as a safer and more secure occupation than life at sea. It is a reasonable assumption and one with which we might have much empathy. In this early section of the play, at the wedding of Thomas and Mary, we learn also that Brigit was an outsider to the village when she married Sam [*Priest - 'It's nice to bring a fresh face into the village. I said the same to Sam at your own wedding'*]. The

Priest encourages Brigit to help Mary settle into the community, just as Brigit had to settle years before. Though from a fishing community (unlike Mary who was of farming stock), Brigit was from the islands. Brigit, therefore, was something of an outsider from the start; she always had an element of the isolation which later engulfs her.

In this society, the women's expectations of life were to wait for their men to return from the sea. The sea itself is understood to be both the means of survival for the community and an unforgiving foe. The men face the prospect of death on a regular basis due to their work; likewise, the women face the prospect of loss. It is a harsh life and their relationship with nature has made the members of the community rather stoical in the face of adversity. Brigit has lost members of her family (*'that water's taken enough from me'*), as have most people in the community.

Generally, the Priest is a well-respected figure in the community. We begin the flashbacks with a marriage – a social ritual – at which he presides (naturally), immediately emphasising the high status of his character. We are also made aware of his longevity within the community (he married Sam and Brigit) and his inside knowledge of the affairs of the villagers - he lets slip to Brigit that Thomas is to abandon the bank for a life at sea with his father, very personal information that might more properly be left to the family to discuss and sort out privately:

PRIEST *I'm sorry, have I said something out of turn?*
THOMAS *No father, not at all. I just. Well, I haven't told my mam the news yet. I was kind of saving it.*
PRIEST *Oh, I see. I'm sorry.*

Later still, the Priest confronts Brigit over her 'refusal of intimacy' with Sam: such a highly personal problem has not only been discussed outwith the marriage (Sam has talked to the Priest about it) but rumours and gossip have been circulating in the village. It is a small society in which privacy is impossible and non-conformity discouraged.

And yet, we are made aware very clearly and early in the play that Brigit does not see things quite the way everybody else does. Her attitude is not unquestioning; the seeds of her challenge to the pervading social norms are laid at the same time:

PRIEST *Sounds like the lad's made his mind up, Brigit. There's not much you can do.*
BRIGIT *No.*
PRIEST *You've got to let a young man have his head.*
BRIGIT *Is that right?*
PRIEST *That's what they say. It happens to every mother.*
BRIGIT *Does it?*
PRIEST *It'll probably turn out for the best.*
BRIGIT *The Lord works in mysterious ways?*
PRIEST *He does.*
BRIGIT *We'll see.*

(2) Acting Examination

- This section might make an interesting acting exercise for those thinking about choosing a section from this play for their Acting Exam. Experiment with the Priest's motives: play him as forgetful and truly sorry; play him as deliberately wanting to reveal Thomas's decision to go to sea because he feels it unfair to keep it from Brigit; play him as deliberately revealing

Thomas's decision in order to show Brigit her status within the family and the community is lower than she perhaps thinks it is – that is, showing the Priest attempting to exercise some form of social control over her.

None of these subtextual experiments is necessarily the correct way to play the Priest. All it will do is reveal some of the options open to you as an actor.

Remember, each time you experiment with the Priest's motives, you will want to modify Brigit's responses and attitude. How much is her challenge an overt act? How much is it a covert act - that is, a hidden act – concealing her full intention so as to use it more effectively later in the play? How much might it not yet be formulated, at this stage, into a conscious challenge at all?

While you experiment with this (or any other) scene, think of how the characters' spatial relationship might emphasise any aspect of their relationship. Where exactly are they on stage? Where do they move? How do they move? Think also of the vocal work that would aid the different interpretations: where are the pauses? Where is the emphasis? What happens to the tone, the intonation, the volume, the pace?

- There are many other sections of this play which would make ideal five-minute extracts. Later sections with the Priest have an exciting conflict to them; scenes containing the villagers' voices or moments when Brigit is both in present time with Michael and past time with the other characters, offer plenty of opportunities for interesting movement work.

(3) Devices used to communicate social, political and religious dimensions

Greenhorn allows the majority of events to unfold through the use of the structural device (or convention) of flashback. We move in and out of present time; sometimes these timescales even overlap. Brigit as a woman in her sixties and Michael as her twenty-something grandson, occupy the present; Greenhorn moves Brigit in and out of this present to the time just before Michael's birth. It is an effective technique which creates an emotive, almost half-lit, half-seen, personal and public history. As a recollection of past events, it encourages us to believe the interpretation offered to us and, though largely perceived and re-told through Brigit's memory, does not seem like a partial interpretation. On the contrary, as an audience, we accept her version of history as it does not exclude criticisms of her.

The play opens with sound effects which have an immediate resonance with the play's location and sense of looming danger – a radio's broadcast of the shipping forecast, the radio's white noise and lifeboat maroons exploding in the distance.

The 'Voices' of the villagers act as a kind of Greek chorus, presaging what is to come, commenting on what is happening and offering opinions and attitudes on characters in the play. These voices are reminiscent of the tragic genre, providing a wider context for the events of the play. They also raise the audience's awareness of the external prejudices which affect Brigit.

(4) Relationship between the individual and the establishment

The individual, in this community, is expected to conform. These individuals have pressure exerted on them to do so and to support each other; to subsume their individuality for the strength they see in the notion of 'community'.

BRIGIT *Everyone knew everyone else. Depended on them, in a way. The people added up to something. Something bigger. More important. Sometimes. The village was a living thing. Everyone was a part of it and everyone had a part to play. To keep it alive. Protect it.*

MICHAEL *Protect it against what?*

BRIGIT *Anything. Change. The truth. Anything that threatened.*

MICHAEL *I don't think I understand.*

BRIGIT *They needed the order. Something to be sure of.*

The 'establishment', in this sense, is the whole structure of Brigit's community – and this is reflected in the roles she is expected to fulfil: wife, mother, neighbour, god-fearing churchgoer (for religion, of course, is another agent in the binding of this social fabric). Brigit challenges all the norms associated with this community. She challenges:

- her role as mother;
- her role as wife;
- her place in the community.

Brigit has a system of belief which pushes her to become an antithetical force in the community; her belief system is an oppositional creed (this makes the play both heavily political and carry 'religious' dimensions). She feels her hand is forced by her husband's support of Thomas's desire to go to sea.

BRIGIT *I'll stop being a mother to Thomas. And I'll stop being a wife to you.*

SAM *What are you trying to do?*

BRIGIT *I'm trying to do what's right.*

SAM *You're mad, woman. You don't know what you're saying.*

BRIGIT *I know exactly what I'm saying. You're asking me to smother everything that my heart tells me. If I do that then I smother the part that makes me your wife. If that's the way it has to be, then that's how it'll be.*

However, the full implications of her beliefs are not felt until the Priest visits her in Scene 3. Far from merely requesting Brigit to call off her refusal to sleep with her husband (which, strangely, has caused some resentment in the village), he is more concerned with the less personal and more publicly political: Brigit's challenge to the orthodoxy that fishing and support for fishing is central to the life and belief system of the village.

PRIEST *But whether I believe that or not, doesn't matter. What matters is that this village needs to believe that there is a future. It's a faith. It's the soul of this place. And I'm supposed to save souls, not destroy them.*

BRIGIT *So you pretend.*

This is, perhaps, the real central conflict of the play. Here, an obviously good person, Brigit, has taken a stand because she has a cause in which she believes and for which she is likely to suffer. Despite the probable condemnation of her community, she stands steadfastly for that in which she believes, even when the argument against her personal stand takes on a public significance.

As her position becomes more entrenched, her estrangement becomes more public. Mary starts to ignore her; Sam becomes more depressed and distant; the villagers condemn her more vociferously. Once again, this time in Scene 4, it is the Priest who drives the play's moral inquiry further by suggesting a memorial mass is held for Thomas:

BRIGIT *I don't want a mass.*
PRIEST *But Brigit, for Thomas's sake. It's time. The village wants a chance to come together in its sorrow. It can be a source of strength.*
BRIGIT *The village can do what it likes.*
PRIEST *You need their support.*
BRIGIT *I don't need anything from them. Or you. I don't need anyone to tell me when I can 'move on'.*

The Priest works for what he perceives as the greater social good – a mass will bind the community together and help heal its wounds. Brigit recognises this as another falsehood: she rejects the notion of sacrificing herself or her beliefs:

BRIGIT *Let me tell you the reason. I was a good wife and a good mother. That was what I was being when I tried to talk Thomas out of joining the boat. I thought that was my place. To look after his interests. To protect. But I was wrong. I wasn't supposed to interfere. Or argue. I wasn't supposed to protect. I was supposed to sacrifice. To let him go off to a noble death, without making a fuss. That was what was required from me, in my place. But I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't stay in my place. That's what this is about. You think I've driven Sam mad. You think I can save him by repenting, cleanse him by confessing. Telling him, and you, and the whole village, that I was wrong; and that I'm sorry; and that Thomas was doing a good thing and has gone to a happier place. So that now we can all sing a hymn and get on with forgetting him.*
PRIEST *It's not like that, Brigit.*
BRIGIT *No father, it's not like that at all.*

By the play's end, we may well feel that Brigit has been right to make her stand. Her uncompromising stance on her beliefs has, for the most part, had a purposeful strength to it. However, she has lost her son to the sea; her daughter-in-law (and future grandchild) to the city; her husband to a broken heart and her respect in the community. She has been branded a witch and been told she is blasphemous.

It is not until Mary reveals to her that Thomas was about to leave the boats and return to a job on land but was waiting for his mother to 'back down', that we are finally encouraged to question Brigit's belief:

MARY *I don't know what you would call it. Principle. Perseverance. Pride. I only know that you had it, and you passed it on to him and it killed him. Whatever it is. My child is not going to suffer it...I don't think you mean to, I wouldn't be talking to you if I did, but you destroy things, Brigit. You're destructive. That's why I can't stay. That's why I'm not coming back.*

Next to the notion of belief, the apportioning of blame is another central conceit of the play. Brigit refuses to accept any of it, though by the end this refusal has become a little more ambiguous:

MICHAEL *You must have regrets.*
BRIGIT *You want to know if I'm sorry?*
MICHAEL *Are you?*
BRIGIT *What do you think?*

Brigit knows what she has done and she carries its consequences into her lonely old age with no, or very few, regrets. Maybe the question we might want to ask ourselves at the play's end is: is her unwavering belief admirable or should we criticise her refusal to compromise?

§3 Some Useful Quotes

Blame, Guilt & Forgiveness

BRIGIT *Alright then. Yes. It's true. Yes, I was right. No, you didn't listen. You were wrong, okay? I was right and you were wrong. That's how it was. And it doesn't bring him back, does it?*

SAM *Forgive me, Brigit.*

BRIGIT *I can't Sam. I can't do that. Look at you. It's you that's doing this to yourself. You. No-one else. I can't kiss it better and make everything alright again. You're torturing yourself. You're the one who has to forgive. You have to forgive yourself, Sam. You're drowning. Look at you. You're just waving and shouting and going under again and again. Do something. For God's sake do something.*

*

MICHAEL *You blamed him.*

BRIGIT *No. I just couldn't forgive him. It's not the same. At least, it felt different to me. He drifted away from me. He was looking for forgiveness. Somewhere. Anywhere.*

*

PRIEST *I pray that God'll forgive you, Brigit McCann.*

BRIGIT *He can do what he likes. I'm not the one looking for forgiveness.*

§4 Current Productions and Issues

Certain themes and issues are raised in this play which provide scope to examine ***The Salt Wound*** in relation to other plays which raise similar themes or issues. It is entirely possible that a question may be set which asks a student to examine a theme or issue which might be considered contemporary, a current trend or a common topic for playwrights. If this is the case, ***The Salt Wound*** may be used with any play (which falls within the SQA's definition of Contemporary Scottish Theatre) of a candidate's choosing.

Alternatively, you may like to examine how these themes and issues are treated in plays solely by Stephen Greenhorn. If so, the notes following on ***Dissent*** will be of particular relevance. (You might also include Greenhorn's ***King Matt***, also published by Capercaillie Books, or any other Greenhorn plays you have seen or read.)

Themes/Issues which you may find useful from the study of ***The Salt Wound***:

- Blame
- Guilt
- Forgiveness
- Exclusion / People as Outsiders
- Challenging of Establishment

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- Belief
 - Sticking to one's Principles
 - End of an Industry
 - Sacrifice
 - Family relationships
 - Use of History
 - Social Dimensions
 - Political Dimensions
 - Religious Dimensions
 - Community
 - The Sea

Dissent

§1 Introduction

Dissent dates from 1998 and, like *The Salt Wound*, was also performed by 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland). Unlike *The Salt Wound's* tight structural form – five scenes set in a single location covering the short space of time of a single evening – *Dissent* is much more cinematic/televisual in its dramatic structure. It contains forty-three scenes (Scene One has five distinct sections so it would be easy to argue that the play actually has forty-seven scenes!) in almost as many locations over a period stretching from 1979 to 1997.

The play charts Paul Gray's journey from minor Glasgow City councillor with a long history of radical, active involvement in socialist politics, to prospective New Labour candidate for the new Scottish Parliament. Along the way he succumbs to the temptation of realpolitik – that is, to jettison his beliefs in order to achieve a desired goal. Along the way he is in danger of losing his family, friends and career but achieves a form of redemption in a political U-turn, which brings the play to a close.

§2 Social, Political and Religious Dimensions

(1) Social background and conditions

Paul, Pat and Derek seem proud of their working class backgrounds.

PAT *I've heard it all before, Derek. Remember where we grew up?*
DEREK *Remember? I've still got the scars.*

They are long-standing Labour activists – Paul has become a councillor, Derek a nightclub manager and Pat a worker at the forefront of Social Services. Their political convictions have been central to their lives and, they seem to feel, the life of their city and their country.

The play virtually never leaves Glasgow (Sheena visits Avril in Cornton Vale near the end) but is never static. George Square is used several times as an outdoor location. It is the site of Sheena and Avril's protest near the beginning and the site of various 'secret' meetings between Harry, Avril and Paul. Other locations include Derek's nightclub (office and cloakroom), Pat's Project office, an illicit rave under a railway arch, a pub, outside a Polling Station, Paul's flat, and many, many more. We see Glasgow through the eyes of the play's protagonists and it is painted as an almost living part of, and vibrant backdrop to, the political life of the city.

SHEENA *It's George Square. Protest is a tradition. You've done your share here. I remember getting dragged along to all those rallies. The miners' strike. The poll tax. CND die-ins...*

Pat's work illustrates the need for Education and Lifelong Learning, for Social Services and Welfare in the city. Despite the support of people like Pat and Paul, despite many years of Labour Party control in the city (and the country at large), major cities still have major problems.

Sheena's penchant for taking drugs and visiting illegal raves emphasises the difference in outlook between those of Paul's generation and Sheena's. However, Derek and Avril's relationship challenges the simplicity of this argument.

Avril's commitment to single issue politics shows us that the young are still involved in radical protest (despite Paul's condemnation of this due to it not being aligned to a bigger, organised political party – '*One thing at a time. That's the trouble with your mob. All single issues. No collective policy*') and that present-day society still produces the need for protest.

[There are no obvious religious dimensions to this play.]

(2) Devices used to communicate social and political dimensions

Whereas *The Salt Wound's* structure is not linear – it leaps around from the present to a time twenty-odd years earlier – *Dissent's* is largely linear. The exception to this is actually just the opening of the play when Greenhorn breaks up Scene One into five sections which skip alternately from 1979 to 1997. From this point on, the play reverts to the present and unfolds in a series of chronologically ordered scenes to Paul's election to the new Scottish Parliament in 1999.

Clearly, the use of music creates a sense of time – Derek's nightclub and the underground rave set the play firmly in the late 1990s.

Voice Overs help move the plot along while at the same time adding a certain verisimilitude to the play's events: *a voice from the television describes Tony Blair's triumphant passage up The Mall to Buckingham Palace; Callum turns up the volume on the telly. Tony Blair is delivering his People's Princess elegy on the death of Princess Diana; a radio news announcement after the Interval reminds the audience what happened before the Interval, adding the public revelation of Paul's involvement in the drugs bust; a Returning Officer announces Paul's successful election as an MSP.*

Littering the play are references to places in (Eastwood, Cornton Vale), to people (Michael Portillo, Ally McLeod, Richard and Judy, Pat Lally, Gordon Brown) and to events (World Cup in Argentina in 1978, 1979 election victory for the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, the Miners' Strike, election victory for New Labour under Tony Blair in 1997).

Some of these references are made to help establish a characters' beliefs (various positions on the left), their backgrounds (Derek's past as a professional footballer) or to make jokes about political figures:

PAT *Intelligence never equates to popularity. Look at Michael Foot.*
DEREK *Exactly. Brain the size of Jupiter. Disaster in the opinion polls.*

(3) Relationship between the individual and the establishment

There are really two different elements to the notion of 'establishment' in this play. One is obviously the conventional notion of the term – government (national or local), family, elders, work, etc. The other, more specifically for this play, is the Labour Party itself and its myriad offshoots on the left wing of British politics. All of the characters in the play belong to the broad political church of the left. Their combat for the soul of their own establishment forms most of the debate in the play.

Paul

Paul's big dilemma in the play is a classic one for drama – how does he match his ambition with his ideals?

Paul began his political life as a radical – he has attended rallies for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and marched in support of the Miners. Over the years, he has become a Glasgow City Councillor with ambitions to become an MSP when

New Labour delivers its promise of a Scottish Parliament. From the outset of the play, we hear repeated criticisms of New Labour by those who would consider themselves to still be on the left of the party:

CALLUM *Not exactly Marx and Engels, was it?*
PAUL *More like Richard and Judy.*

*

DEREK *Only the English could invent a church where belief in God is optional. Like only they could have a Labour party where socialism was a dirty word.*

*

CALLUM *. . . just don't try and be outstanding. Keep it simple and straightforward. Nothing outspoken. Nothing radical.*
PAUL *New Labour. The bland leading the bland.*

*

Paul makes sense of his initial betrayal of Pat's Community Education Project by seeing his actions as protecting the long-term future:

PAUL *This is a little battle in a much bigger war, Pat. We can't win here. It has to be about damage limitation.*

What he soon accepts, however, is the very pragmatism he has been condemning:

PAUL *We had nothing but policy for eighteen years. What good did it do us? If you want change, you need power.*

Paul is then sent into a spiral of moral issues. His decision to help cut the Community Education budget is rewarded with a place on a high-profile roads sub-committee. If he delivers the all-clear to the council to build the by-pass, he will be further rewarded with a candidacy for a seat in the new Scottish Parliament.

He achieves all of this but not without abandoning his principles and losing the respect of his family and friends. However, with Avril's collusion, he resorts to bribery and quietly arranges for his daughter to avoid a scandal (and, therefore, avoids one himself) and sees that the road is not built. By doing this, Paul must become a corrupt politician and effectively ruins Harry's career. Somewhere in the mixed-up world of Paul's moral universe, he thinks has won and his career advances.

Avril

Avril, of course, attempts to reveal the lie of Paul's actions. For her, Paul's cutting of the Community Education Project budget is not an act of pragmatic idealism, but an act of opportunistic careerism – he does it for reward (scene 11).

She turns out to be one of the most interesting characters in the play. We are introduced to her as a single-issue radical. Paul calls her 'a soap-dodging trouble-maker' but she very pointedly says, as early as scene 3, *'I'm whatever it takes, councillor. Whatever it takes.'*

She lets the budget cuts question out of the bag knowing that Pat will give Paul a hard time over it. It is grand political machination played out in a very personal arena and another early intimation that Avril is not all she seems.

Even her older boyfriend, Derek, senses something different about her:

AVRIL *Dissent is a part of a healthy democracy.*
DEREK *I'm not arguing! I was wondering if you didn't just enjoy a fight?*

By scene 17, Avril is trying to use Sheena to get information about the road by-pass from her contact on the sub-committee (Paul). Avril is surprised when Sheena refuses because, even though Sheena supports the protest against the road, she will not resort to what she believes are underhand actions to achieve her goals.

Avril is as much, if not more, of a pragmatist than Paul. She even uses Pat, manipulating her into providing photocopies despite knowing her office is critically short of supplies. By the end, she has used everybody, even her boyfriend Derek, and is quite happy to sacrifice her freedom by going to jail if it means the by-pass will be defeated:

AVRIL *I've already served years. Living in trees. Down tunnels. In tents. Years fighting this kind of development. Years in the mud and the rain. And at the end of the day the roads still got built. D'you see? I saw a chance to stop this one in its tracks. No mud. No rain. A chance to kill it at birth. I had to take it. I had to do this.*

Avril's ultimate act of pragmatism is an ironic conclusion to the play. She and Paul have far fewer differences than they and others might think.

Sheena

Sheena, much like Derek and a little like Pat, is an idealist. It might be argued that their idealistic form of left-wing politics is a little naïve: that their approach to the issues of the day is doomed to failure because they are not prepared to behave in a manner contrary to their beliefs. In effect, they are not prepared to be political in pursuit of their political aims.

Greenhorn does not seem to suggest which approach is the most admirable. Avril and Sheena discuss, near the end of the play, what has happened. We are to make up our own minds as to who, if any, we are to agree with:

AVRIL *Don't be like that. I thought you'd understand.*
SHEENA *Avril, this whole thing's sick.*
AVRIL *It's politics. At least everyone got what they wanted.*
SHEENA *You think so? What about Derek?*

AVRIL LOOKS GUILTY AS SHE THINKS OF HIM.

SHEENA *And what about me? What've I got out of it all, eh? My best friend's in jail and my dad's a crook – because of me. And the only chance I had to put things right - they took it away from me.*
AVRIL *Sheena. It wasn't personal.*
SHEENA *No. It was just a big game. With everyone else as pawns.*

§3 Current Productions and Issues

As was pointed out in the notes to *The Salt Wound*, it is an optional feature of the Unit, Contemporary Scottish Theatre, to discuss the work of a single playwright (for our purposes, Stephen Greenhorn) under the umbrella term Current Productions and Issues.

(1) Themes

Dissent clearly shares certain thematic similarities to *The Salt Wound*. If you were to prepare for an analysis of these two plays on thematic issues, you might want to consider how Greenhorn examines the following, looking at how they compare and/or contrast with each other:

- Guilt
- Blame
- Sacrifice
- Political Dimensions
- Social Dimensions
- Belief
- Sticking to one's Principles
- Exclusion / People as Outsiders
- Use of History
- Family Relationships
- Challenging of Establishment
- Community

Though the plays are very dissimilar in terms of structure, characterisation and use of structural devices/conventions/techniques, they actually examine very similar human motives, attitudes and beliefs, and the relationships people form with the social and political world around them. An essay question using these two plays offers a student a great deal of mileage to compare similarities and to contrast dissimilarities.

(2) Characterisation

However, it is also common to examine a single playwright through characterisation. If this were the case, both plays offer scope for study. Bear in mind what an essay question might be looking for *specifically* (e.g. how characterisation reveals plot, or theme; or does the playwright deal in stereotypes or offer a range of well-rounded characters?) before looking at the elements of characterisation which one might use to justify any opinions. For instance, look at how characters have similar or dissimilar:

- Roles / Purposes / Functions in the play
- Personalities
- Motivations
- Social Class/Backgrounds
- Development through the course of the play
- Gender concerns
- Political concerns
- Relationships with other characters
- Status

(3) Exercise

As an exercise, take Brigit and The Priest from *The Salt Wound*.

- Examine Greenhorn's characterisation
- Relate their characterisation to the play's themes

Now do the same with Paul and Sheena (you could choose others, if you prefer) from *Dissent*.

- What leaps out as a common concern of Greenhorn?
- What reveals his range as a playwright?

(4) Acting Exam

Due to the play's cinematic structure, there aren't too many lengthy scenes to choose from. However, there are many scenes which might provide just the right length of time for an acting exam (candidates are advised to be acting for approximately five minutes during any extract chosen). It is also acceptable practice to link two scenes from different sections of the play to create a single extract on which to be examined.

Here are two examples of extracts which might provide students with profitable acting roles:

- Two Males. Scene 30 – Derek and Paul.

This is a short scene. Derek has just been sacked as nightclub manager as a result of being caught at an illegal rave. He is furious and disappointed with his very old friend – Paul's actions have led to Derek's girlfriend, Avril, being arrested and facing a long jail term for possession and intent to supply a Class A drug. Derek also reveals Sheena's drug-taking to Paul. Paul, while being apologetic, is also shocked at his discovery of Sheena's behaviour. He is then confused in his response, first criticising Derek for not telling him, then feeling a little guilt at not knowing himself; while finally trying to justify his actions and relieving himself of blame. Both characters go through a great deal in this very short scene.

- Two Female, One Male. Scene 31 – Pat, Paul and Sheena.

This is a longer scene. Paul is being pushed further and further away by Sheena because of his growing propensity to act without thought to the moral implications. Paul, though he knows he has acted incorrectly, is keen to admonish his daughter's behaviour and actions as regards her drug habits. Paul (the ex-idealist) and Sheena (the idealist) - have become polarised – socially, domestically and politically. Pat is trapped between the two. She has always been more able than Paul to accept Sheena as an independent person but she is also very disappointed in her at this moment. She has always respected and agreed with Paul's politics but now sees that he has moved to a pragmatic approach which ignores ideals in order to achieve his goal. She is the only one to remain fairly calm in the scene, working out the full implications of the problem they all now face. Pat's idea, which Sheena also seriously considers, is another example of the crucial dilemma Paul has to confront: Sheena owning up to her involvement is obviously the right thing to do; Paul's career, his whole reason for rejecting his own moral conscience, will be threatened by Sheena choosing this course of action. Much of the play's central question is contained in this scene – idealism or pragmatism?

(5) Theatre Company

It should not be forgotten, lastly, that Current Productions and Issues also offers the opportunity for candidates to examine plays produced by a single Scottish theatre company. Both *The Salt Wound* and *Dissent* were originally produced by 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) in the 1990s. Clearly, this creates ample material for study.

A student may want to research the company and look at other plays it has produced – a popular choice of play text for this Unit in the past has included perhaps 7:84's most celebrated production, *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black, Oil* produced in 1973. The company's website (www.784theatre.com) contains a great deal of information and the company has been the subject of much academic research in the past which means there are many resources from which to study the work of the company.

As a way in to this aspect of study, it should be remembered that 7:84 is a political theatre company and it is therefore obvious that any plays it produces contain what must be termed 'political' material. The company's allegiance to party political issues and small, single issue politics, has been modified at different points over the years, usually dependent on its funding and the concerns of the incumbent Artistic Director. It is the degree and type of each play's political import which will differ.

For instance, *The Salt Wound* is political with a small 'p'. It is about both the personal politics of the family and the public issues of conformity; about the power of a woman in a repressed society to hold her beliefs; about the debate between conforming and challenging the prevailing establishment and the status quo. Politics, in this sense, is about power and control – and who has it – in a less public forum. The private feeds into the public in this play.

Dissent, on the other hand, is more boldly political with a capital 'P'. It revolves around the conflict within the Labour Party: from the idealism of radical activists and what is now termed 'Old' Labour, through the jaded, blandness of New Labour, to the cut-throat, corrupting 'business' of single issues and careerism. The play has personal plot lines running alongside this bigger picture but relies for its dramatic climax on the public issues rather than the private ones. The reverberation of these public issues means the public feeds into the private in this play.

§4 Some Useful Quotes

Blame, Guilt & Forgiveness

PAT *It's not about fair or unfair. Who got caught, who didn't. It's about right and wrong. That's all. I just want Sheena to do what's right.*

PAUL *You want her to go to jail?*

PAT *I want her to be able to live with herself.*

*

SHEENA *I was dreading this bit. Walking away and leaving you here. I was sure I'd feel too guilty to do it. What do I know?*

*
