

Birds of Paradise 25th anniversary speech

Mark Fisher

A couple of months ago, towards the end of January, Robert Softley Gale asked me if I would talk at this event. He said he'd like me, as a theatre critic, to give a few thoughts about my experience of Birds of Paradise over the years.

He added that there'd be no expectation of unequivocal praise.

The very idea!

At the time, I couldn't quite think what my way into talking about Birds of Paradise would be. As with any company, I've had lots of different reactions to its shows – some positive, some less so – but I wasn't sure how to say something that would bind everything together. What would be my unifying narrative? I've seen physical theatre, historical drama and an outrageous sex comedy – but what was the through line? I knew I'd have to give it some thought.

And then, just three days after Robert had emailed me, came the announcement of Creative Scotland's devastating funding decisions. Along with such other pioneering Scottish companies as Catherine Wheels, Lung Ha and Visible Fictions, Birds of Paradise was going to have its status as a regularly funded organisation removed. Rather than a celebration of 25 years in business, this evening's event – if it had happened at all – looked set to be a wake.

"Great," I thought. "I won't have to write a speech."

Every cloud has a silver lining.

But as we know, that's not how the story ended. Thanks to the outcry from artists, audiences and politicians, the board of Creative Scotland hastily convened and, surprisingly, agreed to overturn some of its most misguided decisions. From the brink of relegation, Birds of Paradise was back in the game.

Perhaps this was a good lesson. It reminded me of the old Irma Thomas song: You Don't Miss a Good Thing (Until it's Gone).

That's because the value of Birds of Paradise goes beyond any individual show. Going back to Robert's remark about unequivocal praise, it doesn't really matter that I enjoyed one production and someone else preferred another. That's normal. Every piece of art creates a range of reactions, because everyone in the audience views it from their own perspective.

It's fantastic when a production is a hit, of course, but just as important is the company's greater purpose. That, of course, its commitment to giving voice to stories that would otherwise go unheard and making visible people who would otherwise go unseen.

In this, I am reminded of a passage from Alasdair Gray's landmark novel Lanark: "If a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively . . . Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves."

That idea can be extended. Just as Glasgow doesn't exist until its artists tell stories, paint pictures and sing songs that bring into imaginative life, so any of us will feel invisible if we are excluded from mainstream cultural expression. Without artists telling our stories, it's as if we don't exist.

So when you see Alison Peebles playing Mother Courage in defiance of her multiple sclerosis; or dancer Rachel Drazek in Crazy Jane embodying a woman's movement disorder; or the British Sign Language interpreter in Wendy Hoose getting her own jokes, you see people who normally slip under the radar being acknowledged. Birds of Paradise gives them imaginative life.

The opportunities Birds of Paradise gives to individual theatremakers is, of course, important, but more important still is this contribution to Scotland's imaginative culture. With or without unequivocal praise, this is a company that says, "We exist."

So here's to the next 25 years.