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Citation for published version:

Bell, C, *Neutrality, the Festival and the Independence Debate*, 2013, Web publication/site, Scottish Constitutional Futures Forum.

<<http://www.scottishconstitutionalfutures.org/OpinionandAnalysis/ViewBlogPost/tabid/1767/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/2025/Christine-Bell-Neutrality-the-Festival-and-the-Independence-Debate.aspx>>

Link:

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Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Christine Bell: Neutrality, the Festival and the Independence Debate

Posted on August 12 2013

Three things happened to me this weekend. They seem related.

First, on Friday a Spanish student based at a University in London rang up to interview me for his research, regarding my role on a group of International Experts that made public recommendations for progress on the Basque Peace Process in May. The language of the international recommendations was very controversial he said: - 'victims' groups objected that you did not use the word 'terrorists' and that you referred to 'the Basque conflict'. Do you think 'the Basque conflict' is neutral and not controversial?' - 'No, I replied, I realise it is controversial, but there is no neutral language about which to talk about these conflicts, because each conflict involves a conflict about what the conflict is about, and we have to call them something.'

Second, I went to Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* at the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) on Saturday night. It was a high-tech production which had taken some liberties with the original. The opera, about a political prisoner who is being tortured to death, was set on a futuristic spacecraft and we were bombarded with floating letters and technological innovation brought to us by invisible screens. The lyrics referenced the treachery of the state, the characters spoke between songs, and a strange Irish narrator randomly drifted across the stage every so often talking about how we were all linked to the great Mima, while travelling in Ariana through Lyra (no – we didn't know what that was either).

True opera buffs became more and more audibly resistant with the narrator's every floating past, there was a lot of anxious discussion during the interval, and at the end of the performance for every person clapping hard there was some-one booing, particularly when the narrator and the techie crew came out to bow. I am booked next to see the *Rite of Spring*, whose first ever production was considered so outrageous by traditional ballet lovers that it provoked a riot and had to be shut down mid-performance, so it was in ways refreshing to be once again in a place where the integrity of the artistic tradition still mattered, even if the reaction was somewhat more muted than in 1930s Paris. Whatever the production's merits (I was clapping), the setting, the technology and references reinforced that *Fidelio* is indeed a political opera. The spacecraft setting was perfect in creating one of those universal liminal places where torture so often takes place (and that liminal quality is in the original text and music, even if other bits were not). The programme notes told us something of Beethoven's political motivations and his views of the state, which were of interesting contemporary relevance.

Third, the next day, on Sunday morning, while having coffee at the book festival I read in the *Scotland on Sunday* (complete with gift-bag goodies), that next year, the current Director's last year, given the run up to the independence debate, he has indicated that 'independence themed productions will be banned' from the Edinburgh International Festival. A particular bone of contention seemed to have been that a Scottish government funded EIF production with an independence allegory a year ago, had been not too good – polemical without convincing of artistic merit (I rush to say I have not seen it and make no judgment). Next year, *Scotland on Sunday* reported, independence will be left to the Fringe - lower art supposedly does it better.

So what did I make of my weekend encounters? I was left musing over three questions.

First, what does it mean for the Edinburgh International Festival to be neutral on the referendum? I suspect the out-going Director may have been headlined somewhat out of context (this is the man who commissioned *Fidelio*), but imagine he was not – what does a ban on independence themed works mean? Does it mean only polemical plays of no artistic merit which are overt campaign tools will be banned? Well, could we not then just avoid them on grounds of poor artistic merit (hints of Wilde)? This is, after all the Edinburgh International Festival. But who is to decide what is of poor artistic merit? The production of *Fidelio* I suspect was viewed by those who booed to be of very poor artistic merit, in service to technological gimmick, perhaps in order to emphasise the opera's polemical dimension. I did not boo, but I have to admit I laughed along with most of the audience when the German translation system translated a line in a duet as 'he is probably confused after the waterboarding'. It was just funny (perhaps you had to be there).

Second, how far should this ban extend? Will it indeed extend beyond works 'about' Independence, to those allegorical to it? If so, how closely allegorical - will Brian Friel's *Translations* be off limits – after all the account of insensitive English soldiers re-naming Gaelic place-names in a colonial project, was surely written to inflame a nationalist-independence minded spirit? Will works decrying Thatcher's Britain be avoided? 'Trainspotting' derivatives and its references to being colonised by wankers, and Braveheart derivatives – well they are an easy goner. But what about any historical production involving British monarchs and their border comings and goings – too critical and they are nationalist, too eulogising and they are unionist. Will works be policed equally for being pro-independence and pro-union? What does it mean for a production to be 'pro-union' and pro 'no' (or pro 'better together')? Somehow that seems less recognisable than being pro-independence. And from this perspective is the alternative proposed EIF Commonwealth Game theme more neutral than an independence theme? The mind boggles on just how this debate could run and run and where it could take us. (Ps. watch out for the complete ban on Beethoven coming up to the European referendum).

Third, what should the International Festival's link to Scotland be? I have only been living and working here a short time, but having previously visited purely to attend the Festival, with an interest in things Scottish and a love of the city, sometimes the International Festival seemed to have surprisingly little to no connection to its place. Now living here and following literary contributions to the independence debate over the last year, the relationship of arts in Scotland to Scotland appears to be one of the most polarised and polarising elements to emerge. It has been surprising to me how quickly debates over the relationship of arts in Scotland to Scotland degenerate into personalised abuse when raised and countered as a 'nationalist' issue. But outsiders can find it puzzling when the EIF reaches globally to every place but Edinburgh. The relationship between place and production is unlikely to disappear with this Director, or with the passing of the referendum, although it may calm down.

My thoughts are this: whatever happens in the referendum, art and politics will continue to be unavoidably linked, everywhere, all of the time. Ensuring neutrality is therefore neither possible nor neutral, in fact we never have a language for neutral. Especially the language of

neutral is not neutral – it makes decisions as to what is neutral and what is political that are political (hints of Orwell).

Moreover, artistic performances at their best are about making us think and see things differently – about introducing complexity where we want to see black and white. I have yet to see a political debate that is not improved by re-placing political certainties with the complexity of the artistic voice. Do we not desperately need the arts to assist us in seeing things differently a month before the referendum? Paradoxically, the EIF is currently cheaper than the Fringe (proper reductions for kids, and we have loads), and more cutting edge (no corporate comedy). We need it to be where things are at.

So what would an alternative approach be? Perhaps to bring it on (as the Book Festival evidently plans to do). That is, adopt the referendum and its eternal and universal questions of nationality and cosmopolitanism, of unity and diversity, of separation and sharing, of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and not belonging, of good art and of bad, as its core theme and roll with it. For besides these questions, what else is there really to think and talk about?

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