

OUR HISTORY

Originally known as The Collectors, the company was founded by Hamish MacDonald in 1998. Matthew Zajac became Joint Artistic Director with Hamish in 2004. Hamish and Matthew first worked together in 1986 as part of the team which created and produced the Faultline Festival, one of the Highlands' first multimedia arts festivals, which took place in Inverness. Faultline ran for 6 years each summer with Hamish and Matthew writing and performing with colleagues in the satirical revue *The Kilt Is Our Demise!* Hamish became a full-time writer in 1999. In the previous year, he wrote and performed the company's first show as part of the Highland Festival, *Redcoats, Turncoats & Petticoats*, from an idea by producer Alan Mackinnon. *Redcoats* was a one-man comedy performed in the boozy confines of the Old Market Inn, in the heart of Inverness.

The company went on to produce *The Captain's Collection* in 1999, again for the Highland Festival, from an idea by Bruce MacGregor. This was a biographical play with live music about Captain Simon Fraser of Stratherrick, an officer in the 19th century British army, inveterate social climber, and, most importantly, the collector of hundreds of Gaelic tunes which might otherwise have been lost to posterity, Gaelic language and culture having been proscribed for over fifty years after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion. The production, directed by Alison Peebles, opened in Stratherrick Hall then embarked on a short tour of the Highlands and Islands. The music from the play was produced by Jonny Hardie into a highly acclaimed CD for the Greentrax label. At the instigation of Bruce, then a BBC radio producer, the play was adapted in four parts for BBC Radio Scotland. This production won the Golden Torc Award for Best Radio Production at the 2000 Celtic Film & TV Festival. *The Captain's Collection* then undertook a more extensive tour of the Highlands and Islands in 2000 with support from the National Lottery Awards For All, and donations from the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee and the Inverness Gaelic Society.

Hamish went on to write *Seven Ages*, a play on the cycle of life in seven acts which had its first short production period as a development project at the 2001 Highland Festival. Each act was a self-contained short play, Highland-set stories on Birth, Discovery, Love, War, Wisdom, Dotage and Death. Acclaimed as "the most glittering jewel in the Highland Festival crown" (*Highland News*), an ensemble of five of Scotland's best traditional musicians – Mary Ann Kennedy, Ingrid Henderson, Maggie MacDonald, Bruce MacGregor and Iain MacFarlane – punctuated and underscored the play which was again performed by Hamish and Alyth with direction by Matthew Zajac.

Another idea was presented to Hamish by Bruce: the life of James Scott Skinner, aka The Strathspey King, arguably the most mercurial, prolific and revered composer of Scottish fiddle music, who led a peripatetic life of fame, fortune and penury. Hamish originally wrote the play, *The Strathspey King*, as a three-part radio series, produced by Bruce and performed by Billy Riddoch. This series again won a Golden Torc Award, this time at the 2001 Celtic Film & TV Festival. The stage production, supported by the Highland Producers Fund and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, featured Bruce MacGregor on fiddle and Christine Hanson on Cello, beautifully realising Skinner's music. Scott Skinner was powerfully and poignantly brought to life by Billy Riddoch, taking the audience on a seventy four year journey from the Strathspey King's childhood to his final tune. The play toured in spring 2003 throughout North and North East Scotland to packed houses and to universal acclaim.

The company then undertook a full-scale tour of *Seven Ages* early in 2004, visiting numerous venues in the Highlands, Glasgow and Edinburgh, with support from the Highland Producers Fund. This time, Alyth and Matthew performed the show, powerfully and eloquently accompanied by fiddler Jonny Hardie and clarsach player Mary MacMaster.

With continuing project support from the Scottish Arts Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise and a growing number of promoters and audiences, Dogstar began to tour more extensively throughout Scotland. The company has also begun to produce the work of other playwrights. Ali Smith's riotous post-modern comedy *The Seer* was a popular hit for the company in 2006. This was the first professional production of a full-length play by Ali, one of the UK's most prominent novelists, twice a Booker Prize nominee and winner of numerous other awards for her novels. *The Seer* also signalled an expansion of the company's creative scope, moving away from its proven form of music theatre into the realms of contemporary farce. Matthew directed a vibrant ensemble – Vivienne Graeme, Douglas Russell, Sarah Haworth, Irene Allan and Mairi Morrison – who embraced the energetic demands of Ali's "near-perfect example of postmodernism in all its playful glory" (*The Scotsman*) with relish.

2006 also saw a short tour with another of Hamish's plays, *The Heretic's Tale*, which told the extraordinary story of Elspeth Buchan, leader of the 18th century apocalyptic cult, the Buchanites. Annie Grace played Elspeth with Matthew as her devoted follower Andrew Innes. Live music accompaniment was provided by fiddle wizard Amy Geddes with direction by Stephen Docherty.

In 2007, Dogstar toured Henry Adam's 'e Polish Quine, a poetic and moving play set in Aberdeenshire at the end of the Second World War. 'e Polish Quine's themes of war trauma, migration and love struck a contemporary chord with our audiences. Our excellent ensemble included Fraser C. Sivewright, Sarah Haworth, Douglas Russell, Anne Kidd, Hamish Wilson and Polish actress Magdalena Kaleta. Matthew directed the production.

2008 saw the company's most successful production to date, Matthew Zajac's *The Tailor of Inverness*. A moving and theatrical play for one actor and a violinist, the play tells the story of Matthew's father, who was born in Eastern Poland (now Western Ukraine) in 1919, taking a perilous journey through the tides of the Second World War to finally settle in Inverness. The

production was directed by Ben Harrison, best known for his site-specific work with Grid Iron Theatre Company. Matthew performed the play himself with a wonderful violin score played by Jonny Hardie and Gavin Marwick. The production opened for a month at the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh after previews at Glasgow's Arches Theatre, selling out quickly and winning three awards. It ran at the Adelaide Fringe in Australia early in 2009, and has since toured Scotland 5 times and to festivals and theatres in Poland, Ukraine, Sweden, Ireland, Wales, England, Denmark, Germany and the USA, recently selling out for 3 weeks at New York's Brits Off Broadway Festival. Around 36,000 people have seen the show to date, with over 260 performances and a 6th Scottish tour due in spring 2019. Matthew was named Best Actor for his performance at the 2009 Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland.

Jacobite Country by Henry Adam, "a nightmare country that combines the rural trauma of an early Sam Shepard play with the grotesquery of a northern Little Britain" (Scotsman) was produced with an all-female cast in 2010, running at the Edinburgh Fringe and touring Scotland. This was an anarchic comedy about dispossession and mental illness, embodied in the character of Haggis McSporran, a wayward stand-up comedian who absconds from the Highland's largest psychiatric hospital with his friend Craitureface. Sarah Haworth, Annie Grace, Mairi Morrison and Fiona Morrison, "entirely convincing as crazed men" (The Stage) made up the brilliant all-female ensemble with Matthew directing and design by Ulla Karlsson.

Jacobite Country was followed up by another dark comedy, *Sweetness* by Kevin MacNeil, adapted from the novel by Sweden's Torgny Lindgren. This is a cold war allegory involving Kate, a writer who becomes snowbound at her temporary digs with an old man who is wasting away with cancer, Archie, at his remote house in the Highlands. She uncovers an epic dispute between Archie and his only neighbour, his corpulent brother Murdo. Lynne Verrall played Kate with Matthew Zajac as Archie and Sean Hay as Murdo in "a strong and brave piece of work" (Northings). The show toured across Scotland.

Dogstar revived Hamish's *The Captain's Collection* in 2012, directed again by Alison Peebles and designed by Ali Maclaurin, performed by Matthew and Alyth McCormack with music from Jonny Hardie on fiddle and guitar and Ingrid Henderson on piano and clarsach. The show opened at the Tron Theatre as part of Scotland's foremost traditional and world music festival, Celtic Connections and then toured across Scotland.

The company produced its first play by a writer from outside Scotland in 2013. *The Baroness* by Danish writer Thor Bjorn Krebs told the story of the intense, manipulative friendship between the extraordinary 20th century Danish writer Karen Blixen (pen-name Isak Dinesen, writer of *Out of Africa*) and the young poet Thorkild Bjornvig. In "a fine production" (Herald), Dogstar was very fortunate to attract one of British theatre's grand-dames, Roberta Taylor, to play Blixen. A leading actress with the great Citizens Theatre Company of the 1970s – '90s, Roberta is also well known for her TV roles and as a writer. The excellent Scottish actors Ewan Donald and Romana Abercromby joined her on stage for this powerful and challenging play.

Mathew met Bruce Norval at a football match in 2008. At the game, Bruce told Matthew his story as a haemophiliac who was administered with contaminated blood products during the 1980s. These gave him Hepatitis C. Thousands of others were even more unfortunate, also contracting HIV. Although he had some awareness of his story, the detail and passion with which Bruce told Matthew the story motivated him to try to create a play. Bruce has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of all of the victims of what has been described as “the biggest disaster in the history of the British National Health Service”, and he proved to be a tremendous source of information for what eventually became *Factor 9*, written by Hamish. After several failed attempts to raise money for the production, we finally succeeded and the show opened in March 2014 in Sweden at Profilteatern as part of Umea 2014 European Capital of Culture. The show had a very powerful effect on its audiences in Sweden and subsequently in Denmark and throughout Scotland. The production and tour was supported by Umea 2014 and Creative Scotland. Dogstar, Bruce and his friend John Martin were determined to present the show at the 2014 Edinburgh Fringe. John provided the initial impetus to create a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign and, with donations from 180 individuals, many of whom were associated with this worldwide tragedy, and from several support organisations, including Haemophilia Scotland and Haemophilia Wales, money was raised to enable a further 24 performances to take place in Edinburgh. Several leading politicians attended and an extract from the play was presented at the Scottish Parliament in December 2014. The play told a horrific story of Scottish victims Bruce Norval and Robert Mackie, played by Matthew and Stewart Porter, and the wider story of the development of blood products, which has a number of sinister aspects associated with personal ambition, corporate greed and exploitation. “no one who sees it is ever likely to forget” (Scotsman).

2016 saw Dogstar’s first full co-production. *Mungo Park – Travels in the Interior of Africa* by Martin Lyngbo & Thor Bjorn Krebs was produced with Mungo Park Theatre of Allerød, a suburb of Copenhagen. The show toured Scotland, running at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe at Summerhall, where it won one of the venue’s Lustrum Awards. It toured in Denmark in 2017, including the Copenhagen Stage Festival and was revived in autumn 2018 for performances at the Leeuwarden 2018 European Capital of Culture in the Netherlands. This highly inventive postmodern tragicomedy told the extraordinary, epic story of the 18th century Scottish explorer Mungo Park on a virtually bare stage, with a motley collection of daft props and costume, a small revolve, a detailed soundtrack and a few well-chosen theatrical effects: “The visuals...are amazing...the lighting and sound are truly spectacular...A triumph of political theatre, Mungo Park will not disappoint.” (Edinburgh Festivals Magazine). Matthew Zajac played Park with 21 other characters shared between the amazingly versatile Kingsley Amadi and Anders Budde Christensen. Martin Lyngbo directed.

The Sky Is Safe in 2017 was about the female experience of the Syrian war and aspects of Britain’s relationship with the Middle East. Matthew Zajac wrote the play after meeting and interviewing a number of women refugees from the war in Istanbul, arranged through the support charity Small Projects Istanbul. The major proportion of the script comprised of edited verbatim extracts from these interviews, with a parallel storyline involving a relationship between a British arms dealer and a Syrian woman working as a prostitute in Istanbul. “An emotionally charged and politically powerful masterpiece” (Edinburgh Festivals Magazine) directed by Ben Harrison, the London Palestinian actress Dana Hajaj played

opposite Matthew Zajac, delivering an outstandingly good performance. “Hajaj shifts, seemingly effortlessly, from one character to the other portraying a variety of emotion and range...a magnified insight into the complex turmoil experienced by female refugees...The Sky is Safe feels like necessary theatre... despite leaving viewers both heartbroken and enraged, the play ends, appropriately, on the word “hope”.” (Common Space) The production won another Lustrum Award and was long-listed for the annual Amnesty International Award. Pippa Murphy designed an evocative soundtrack and set was designed by the Syrian Kurdish artist Nihad Al Turk.

Swedish partners Profilteatern co-produced with Dogstar in 2018. The play was Let's Inherit The Earth by Morna Pearson, a punk musical comedy about climate change which was developed over the previous three years. Directed by Ben Harrison and with a cast of three Swedes and two Scots – Tobias Morin, Lina Hognert, Jan Karlsson, Matthew Zajac and Sarah McCardie – the show rehearsed in Umeå and opened at the Pleasance for the Edinburgh Fringe prior to touring in Scotland and Sweden. With a supercharged set of punk rock songs by Jonny Hardie, arranged with Brian Macalpine and a striking design by Ulla Karlsson, the show proved popular with audiences on both sides of the North Sea. “Quite simply, a show and a half... combines hilarity with devastating political satire ...one of the most anarchic, timely and memorable shows on the Fringe.” (Scotsman)

All of Dogstar's new productions since 2006 have been supported by project grants from the government-funded Scottish Arts Council/Creative Scotland. While this support has been essential to the company's growth, project funding is unreliable: we don't always succeed with our applications for this funding and the company has often had to rely on the good will and sometimes unpaid labour of its artistic directors. Dogstar has made four attempts to gain 2- and 3-year core-funding commitments from the funding body since 2007. None of these has been successful, even though there is no project-funded company in the history of Scottish theatre which has so much international success. In October 2014, we received our third rejection for core funding. This led to a substantial protest from our board, our supporters and even some members of the Scottish Parliament, but to no avail. Sadly, this led to the resignation of founder Hamish MacDonald. Matthew Zajac continues as the sole artistic director and he has been joined by the dynamic producer Donna Macrae of Firefly Productions. And Creative Scotland continues to support the company's projects. Dogstar's board is currently developing a new fundraising scheme for friends and potential business supporters of the company to provide a greater degree of financial stability, while the company continues to produce consistently excellent new theatre with its impressive pool of writers, designers, directors, actors and technicians.