

A conversation with James Kelman

In September 1999 the first new play by James Kelman for five years was ready for production on a profit-share basis by a small Glasgow-based company, the actor Gary Lewis had already committed to it. At the time Kelman was joint holder of the Scottish Writer of the Year award. Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre was the first venue approached. It was Kelman's choice; during past years three of his own plays and one of his translations have been produced there. The Traverse requested that in the first instance Kelman should submit the play for consideration by the "literature committee". He replied to the effect that he didn't do auditions these days. The Traverse insisted so he withdrew the play and wrote to the Scottish Arts Council to express his feelings about the situation.

This is an informal conversation, more than an interview, recorded in late August 2000, which reveals something of what it is to be a writer working in Scotland.

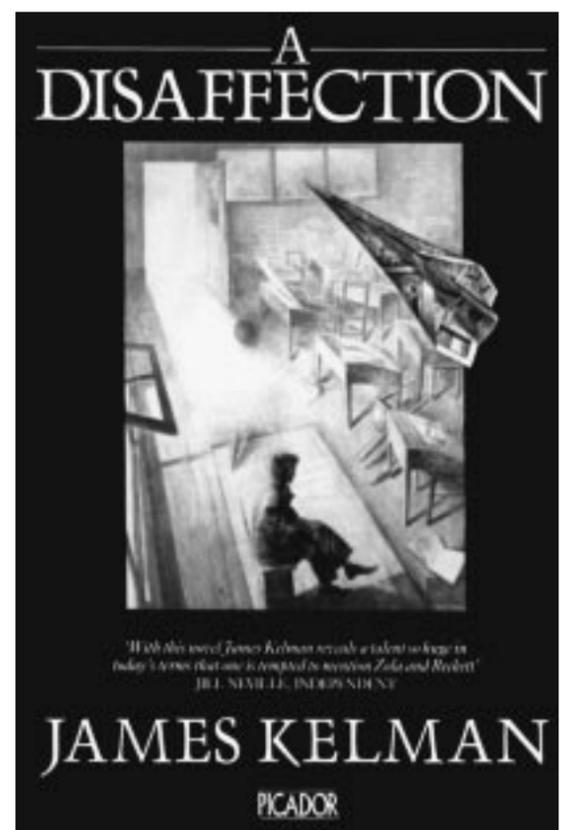
William Clark

James Kelman When I got involved in this thing last September [1999], almost a year ago, I thought of it as something personal and was wanting to keep it personal. I'd just come home from the States, I had been away about a year so things were kind of hectic and I didn't want to get too involved. I didn't have the time to get involved anyway, I had a lot of stuff to clear up; the new novel, get on with my essays, then the plays. But I thought about going public. There seemed to be a lot happened within the Arts Council in the last couple of years that was detrimental, and it should be taken on. The changes to do with the Book Trust for instance, as I understand it the Book Trust is now responsible for a lot of work the Literature Department used to do. Things that had been the case are no longer the case, such as money. Before, if you were ever taking part in a gig, doing a reading or whatever, where the audience were charged to get in, you'd always be paid a minimum wage. The writer would not take part in something where there was an admission fee and no payment and the Arts Council would not have supported such an event. There was always a basic payment for the writer. That was part of the way things used to operate so there's been a lot of changes, all these rip-off readings from places like Borders and Waterstones, writers never getting a paid a penny, why don't they boycott them. I remember a couple of years back the Edinburgh Book Festival broke the guidelines, they offered me a fee of fifty quid. I couldn't believe it. At that time the minimum Arts Council fee was £80, maybe £70. It was extraordinary they tried to get away with it. They were surprised when I said no! I don't know how it is at the Book Festival nowadays, I haven't been back since.

No writer should ever take part in that kind of shit. The public getting charged money to get in as

well, why don't they pay the writers a proper fee! The same with financial support to arts magazines, the main reason the Arts Council gave it was so the writers who wrote for them got a payment for the contribution. So there was that, then the way the education department has crept into the Arts Council reckoning as well. Does that mean their criteria will start being used to deal with writers, censoring or suppressing the ones school inspectors don't want to be seen or heard in a classroom? So now writers who are in any way radical are going to stop getting readings? is that what it means? It'll just be all the safe bastards who'll be earning the fees from school or university readings. Of course that is the way it is just now anyway when you look about, I'm talking generally, the ones getting all the 'creative writing' and residency jobs. You just have to look at the literary brochures and flyers coming at you, quite a cosy wee scene, and then there's the usual team that gets all these invitations to British Council events—Burns Suppers in Turkey and Israel, Saudi Arabia, etc.

So a lot of different things, I felt there was a lot of questions needing to be addressed. Other writers feel the same. And if I had got too involved in this thing of mine with the Arts Council I thought I would wind up having to address these other issues and I didn't want to, so I was being selfish, no time no energy. I tried to keep it at that personal level, just me moaning. Here was a situation pertaining to myself, one writer, a writer who has done this much work, x-amount. It doesn't have to be good, bad or indifferent work either, just that if this writer gets a new book out people will read it and if he puts on a new play audiences will want to go and see it. Good bad or indifferent. Just because the writer has already done all that work



in the past and the audience know it, and now here he's got a new work out, that's why the audience are going to be interested. They might go away and criticise it, condemn it, but they'll go and see it in the first place, because it's a particular writer they know: "Kelman's first play for five years, let's go and see it." The Traverse wouldn't have lost, it was just a profit-share, no wages, but we would've got some expenses. So these kind of arguments, basic arguments, I just wanted to let the Arts Council hear my side of it, I can't get my work on in this country unless I'm prepared to put up with these stupid insults. Not even for nothing! Submit your work for consideration! They're so fucking naive, they don't even know they're insulting you. Or do they? I felt part of the strength of my case was because it was one writer, it didn't matter who the hell you were, to the extent that even somebody who was joint holder of the Scottish Writer of the Year Award, Booker Prize bla bla bla, even a writer like that could not get a play on without auditioning, getting approval from some sort of literature committee, without meeting their criteria, whatever that might be, amazing crap. A profit-share remember, we weren't looking for any commission-type payment from the theatre, just a percentage of the box-office, we were doing all our own rehearsals, finding our own space, in our time, every damn thing, props, the fucking lot, we were asking nothing from them at all except the space to perform the play for a week or two—well, a week, five or six days, they told us there was no chance of a fortnight—nobody gets a fortnight for a touring show, so they

say. I thought the strength of the case lay in keeping it personal. A general case could come about but only as an effect of the personal thing. As well as that I felt it was something that could be put right if I explained the situation as clearly as I could, "I cannot get a play on at the Traverse Theatre for nothing, not even for no money," just something like that.

William Clark You wrote to the Arts Council?

JK Yeah.

WC There's an expectation that they can do something. There's also an expectation—you were saying—you assumed that people were aware of your work or that people had made themselves aware of what's going on in Scotland. One makes these assumptions: that people at a certain level within the Arts Council are even aware of these things or aware of real problems within their organisation or even aware of contemporary art, and they tend to be oblivious.

JK You're right to that extent, but it took me a while to realise that they didn't know my work. They maybe knew it by repute. And not always by the repute I would have chosen. I mean what was coming across was that they didn't really know my work and some of the attitudes they had to it were the same kind of attitudes you would get from papers like the *Sunday Times*, not the Scottish edition.

WC 'It's not proper literature.'

JK Yeah, they regard me as a 'primitive', 'pre-culture'; writers like me are 'savages'. But it surprised me, even at this stage in your writing life how you still get the vaguely patronising, vaguely irritated attitude coming to you from the Scottish Arts Council. It's an anglocentric thing, quite a common attitude to Scottish art from people in high Arts Council positions. So there are two points there Billy, the first thing relating to what you scoffed at, the idea of the Arts Council being able to have some kind of influence on their own employees, I mean the staff at the Traverse Theatre. Of course they saw the Traverse employees as the ones they're in solidarity with. Whatever the employee says goes, and they'll back them up to the hilt. They see you as being the foreigner, the artist. The artist is the alien figure that they're in opposition to. They don't see themselves as people who are there in order to support and assist artists. They don't see themselves as that.

WC Not at all.

JK So the first point you made is dead right. Yeah I wouldn't have illusions about that. Except I did have expectations! In relation to the Traverse you've got to remember that I'd already had a play produced there—two plays. In fact it's been four I've had over the years. One play was actually commissioned by them, and I had one translation commissioned from them as well, a play by a French writer, both about 10 or 12 years ago. So what with that and my last play on—*One-two-hey* with the Blues Poets band—you felt, well, there's no question here, no economic question either because *One-two-hey* sold out, there's going to be a proper box-office return, it's guaranteed. The Traverse'll know all that stuff already.

WC They were aware of that?

JK I don't know. I think I wrote to the director of the theatre in the first place just to make sure he was aware. If he hadn't been at that time then I was going to fill him in with the details. I was basically expecting that he was going to put a word in the ear of the Traverse admin staff: "Don't worry, it's James Kelman, he's a known writer here in Scotland and he's already got a track record, people'll go and see his stuff. It's just a profit-share touring thing anyway." Instead of that the director's position to me was "Well I'm backing up the decision already made by my staff and you're out of line expecting anything different. But don't worry, the committee are not going to actually judge your play, it's something else, they just want to see if it fits the Traverse bill." Something like that, just splitting hairs. "You've got to put your work in front of our literature committee the same as anybody else. Do you expect to be treated differently because you're a senior writer?" The

Traverse director used that phrase which grated on me, putting me in my place, "senior writer". Not because of the age thing, I don't dispute it, I'm in my 50s. But there was the implication that somebody like me expects to be beyond criticism just because I'm an old bastard, as if I'm saying younger writers should be criticised and judged but not me because I'm beyond it.

So that kind of shite. I felt it was important for me to address that. On the one hand I felt yeah, there's elements in what you're saying that are true. But I know my own response isn't just due to egocentricity or perversity or out and out vanity. There is some underlying critical point I want to get to. So I went into it, I tried to work out what the argument was. Why is it that I expect to be treated differently from somebody else. Is that what I was asking? Here's another way of saying it: Why does the 53 year old Kelman expect to be treated differently to the 25 or 30 year old Kelman? It can't just be an ego thing. Or can it? So these kind of questions.

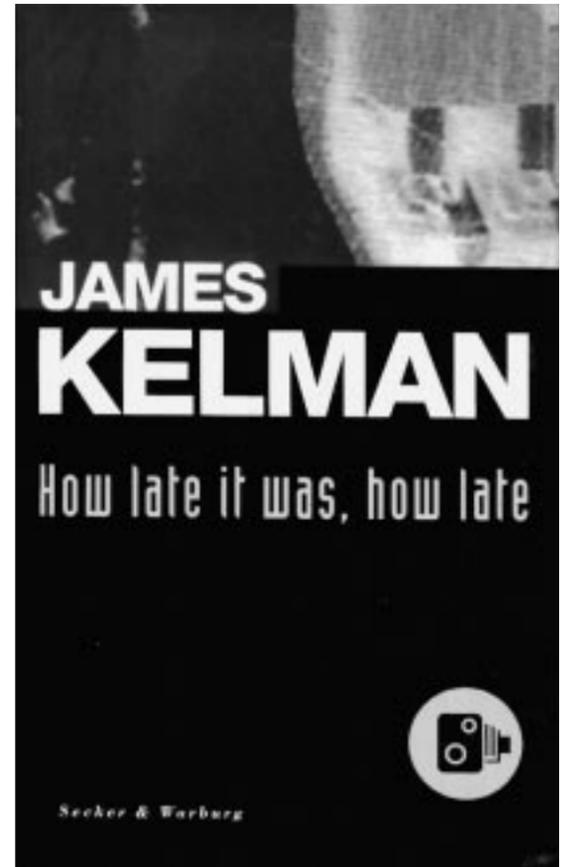
I was saying to them the burden of proof is not on me as a writer, that became the bottom line. Look, here is all the work I've produced, it's all out there, it's available, it can be criticised and looked at whenever. If you want to check out my stuff go to the fucking library. I don't have to prove to the Traverse literature committee or any other damn committee that I'm capable of doing this, that or the next thing. I've done all that, time and time again. Here is all my work, it's all out in the open. Just about everything I've ever written is still in print, including three of my plays. So why is it that you want to "consider" my work? What's the context or whatever that makes it valid for you to make that demand? Why do you feel that my work needs to be "considered" by you? Is it to establish that my play will be worthy of being staged at the Traverse? Is it just to see if it'll be "good". What evidence do you have to suggest that I might give you in something that's "bad"? Away and check your records, go and see how my last three or four plays went, my last two plays sold out, you've got the figures, what the hell is it, what's going on here?

WC So this is the Traverse Theatre literary Dept.?

JK Yeah, literature committee

WC Who is that?

JK I hear it can be anybody in the Traverse who's around. They weren't going to say it was this individual or that individual. Just whoever was in that committee at that time. I don't know who it is. It wouldn't matter who it is. I wouldn't allow my work to be "considered" by any of the Arts Council bosses, never mind the literary committee at the Traverse. I'm one of the ones who would never apply for these £25,000 grants they're always on about, "Creative-Scotland" awards! For me no one who is a serious artist, who has produced a real body of work, can ever apply for these grants. They're premised on certain attitudes or values in relation to art that very few real artists could support, not honestly, they would have just to kid on. There's a certain way of looking at art, or what equals the 'end' of the art project, it can be seen in the brochure/application thing. It's a kind of end-means way of looking at art that I don't think artists themselves really share at all. Old fashioned reactionary crap, it's 19th century stuff. "How do you expect this work to be valued by the public?" That sort of stupid question Arts Council officers give to artists before handing them out money so they can go and do their fucking work. Naive shite. I would not allow my work to be put in front of any of these people, no, no longer. I might have when I was a young artist, because I had no body of work, fair enough, sometimes I did do that. But sometimes I didn't do it. When Polygon made that first contact with me for *Not Not While the Giro*, back in 1981 I had already stopped sending my stuff out for "consideration". Even at that time I had stopped it. If they wanted my stuff fine, I gave them it, if they didn't I didn't, I wasn't going to fucking audition. That was then never mind now. But if you have a substantial body of work there's no need anyway I mean what the fuck do they want off you?



WC So is it your concept of the artist that is alien to these people. You use the word artist, they use the word, but it's not the same.

JK Yeah, not at all. It's weird to meet it head-on like that.

WC For them an artist is some form of rent boy or something: you're rented; but sometimes you don't even get the money.

JK Yeah, that became quite clear, it becomes clear in the whole phraseology, I got another of the "Creative-Scotland" awards information through the letter-box recently. It came through my agent believe it or not...

WC Ha!

JK Yeah, "I thought I should make you aware of it." She's right but, of course she should make me aware of it, that's the sort of thing she gets paid for, she's a good agent. The first time I was sent it was in the middle of all the shenanigans, it was from the director of literature or maybe the overall Arts Council director. Probably an obscure form of put-down. You could only apply in a cynical way because like I said it's got certain attitudes towards art which one cannot share in the year 2000. To give the Arts Council the benefit of the doubt, these are very old fashioned attitudes, not beyond first year art theory or something. They make these assumptions about how "we" value art. Its like, What! in order to discover the merit of my work I've got to look at how the audience responds to it! I beg your pardon! The beholder's response to a work of art will define the value of the work of art! That sort of ludicrous shite. You expect it from first year students, not from people experienced in art. But it's very convenient in relation to funding if you're representing a public body dishing out so-called public funds to so-called artists, you get seen as an efficient individual who is putting the wishes of the public totally to the fore, it's pure crap.

WC It's just a bureaucratic expediency. They're now getting to the position whereby they prescribe the work: "We will fund a film like..." and then they name a film maker who they like. That makes their job easy, it makes arts administration a very biased phoney rationing of resources. That's all it is.

JK There was a Scottish film maker based in New York, a young guy, he was wanting to do a film of my novel *The Busconductor Hines*, a few months ago. So I did the first draft screenplay to get things moving, it was long, 250 to 300 pages, a full piece of work. Later on in the process the guy approached Scottish Screen. I didn't know he was doing that, but when he told me I went along with it. I thought there must be something in it, maybe a change in policy, maybe they were starting to



support actual writers... Then I was asked along to an interview with the Scottish Screen people. I liked the guy I met there and quite respected what he was saying at first. But then I realised that the only reason I was there was they were wanting to work out if I was worthy of being given a wee up-front sum of dough in order to complete a second draft, or maybe take it a stage further, get it finished, I can't quite remember. That was all it was, all that palaver, just to see if they would throw me a few quid to do more work on the screenplay, they wanted to see if it was merited or not. To give me the fucking money I mean! I was supposed to submit the first draft of the screenplay to them so they could say whether or not I was worthy of getting this small up-front sum of dough.

I said "No, you're not judging me at all, what are you talking about?" They were wanting to "consider" my first draft and chat about whether or not the project was merited or some such shite! I had already done all the work—the slogging stuff—for nothing, for no wages, that first draft like I said, I done a full job on it. Remember as well that this was a film based on my own adaptation of my own novel. So all this crap was just if they would deign to give me a wee sum of dough in order for me to go away and work on it some more. The public's dough! This is Scottish Screen right. The guy who's interviewing me, he's got my entire first draft screenplay in front of him.

It was to be a three person committee. So who's to be involved in that? How are they going to do their judging? Are they going to read my novel and then read the first draft screenplay, and if so then what, what does that tell them? And who's to do it anyway, who is there in Scottish film that's work a fucking button, who is there to respect as an artist, is there anybody at all, maybe one or two. But really, it's hard to think of anybody in Scottish movies you could trust as an artist, they all compromise, they go for easy options, else they just sell out altogether, and now they're going to sit and "consider" my work! Fuck off. I just find that extraordinary, I'm talking about six months ago. At this stage in my life my work is going to be judged by people like that to get a couple of thousand quid to go away and work on the next stage of the screenplay. It is fucking unbelievable. This is public money for christ sake it's for artists, to help them do their work, let us do our fucking work, it's just a wage, you'll get it back. What right do they have to stop us doing our work? That's what happening. The same as happened to the play, that film project has finished, like every other film project I've ever been involved in, nothing.

WC But a great deal of the public money is tied up by the administrators of public money. You mentioned Scottish Screen. It emerged that previous director, gave himself a million pounds of Scottish Screen public money, over and above his salary as an administrator, for his own project. Some people are administering these things to try to get at the money first.

JK Well they're succeeding.

WC The government policy may or may not be well-intentioned, but all they can ever produce ends up as an opportunist's charter. Certain perennial problems of government exist. We're asked to believe that with prohibition in America they couldn't foresee the rise of...well, look at the drug laws now: they actually pretend they're working. They can't admit that corruption will destroy any system.

JK It was foolish of me to get involved. It was a misunderstanding. You see I hadn't realised that the guy in New York who was going to get things moving had approached Scottish Screen at this trivial level. I thought there was a new approach going on and they were saying, "Right, Kelman is going to do an adaptation of one of his novels at long last and he's already done a full first draft screenplay. The project's got x-amount of dough ready to come in from Canada and New York and wherever, once it's up and running, so if we give them such and such an amount that'll get the thing moving, once we stick in something the overseas money'll start coming in." That's the level I thought the discussion was going to be at. Then I

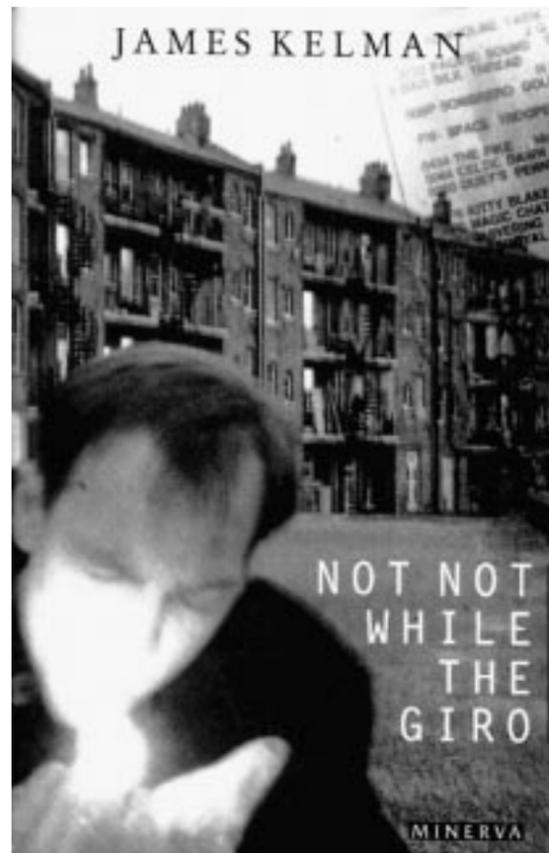
found out no, it was the same old story, it was back to that old stage where I was going to have to audition my work for a committee of three just to see if I was worthy of the chance to develop my fucking screenplay. And not even to get proper dough, just a wee personal sum so I could revise the fucking script! there's a good boy, a pat on the head. I felt oh christ I'll call this off immediately.

The way I see it over the years Scottish Screen was always just a corrupt body, intellectually bankrupt, like the telly or something. All you have to do is see the people involved in writing the shoddy third rate work that comes out. It never uses real writers. Why is that? Maybe once in a blue moon. It gives a lot of money to actors, directors and all these other people to do screenplays. How come they never pay real writers? The bottom line is they don't want real writers. It's like Hollywood in the 50s or something.

WC But a lot of American writers did work for the movies, Faulkner...

JK Yeah there was a good period. But the 50s was a time when they started to get rid of real writers, the McCarthy era. What you saw was how the directors became the main figures, real writers were too political. So Scottish Screen in that sense is just part of the usual Scottish Arts scene. All they want is working-class sentimental shite, a kitchen-sink fantasy land, fucking hopeless. What a waste of time, all the emotional energy. For me now it's finished, Scottish theatres like the Traverse as well, finished in a personal way. I should've known that a while back when the Traverse refused to let me, Tom Leonard and George Gallacher's blues band use their space to play a one-off night, they didn't think we could get an audience—for a one-off night performance! Fucking hell man. Another profit-share thing. That was less than three years ago, just before I went to work in Texas. Of course theatre's been finished for a while now anyway and I should have realised that. I'm finishing this new book of essays of mine and there's a big diatribe I wrote back in 1987 or something, caused by the shit that went on trying to put on another play of mine, *In the Night*. So here I am just now fighting a battle I wouldn't have wasted my time fighting twelve or thirteen years ago. I wrote a bit about it in the introduction to that book of plays of mine, *Hardie & Baird*. Fucking waste of energy. It's shocking, but at the same time...

WC Earlier on we were criticising the history of Scottish theatre and now with all the closures and 'privatisation' there's no future. Some people would say there's been a lot of things: some sort of reputations and ultimately it's come through. Theatres have come through 'Thatcherite' arts council policies whereby it's complete commercialisation and forget anything else. I felt that



via the Arts Council the government pushed this managerialism—organisations were swayed through that, because it was presented as purely administrative. Now it's all up in the air again: it's still totally tied in with government policy, there's no two ways about that. To get funding from the Arts Council you must follow *and like* the government policies and views or put up a believable impersonation of that. But what are the models for that kind of thing: Stalinist Russia? Who exactly is being helped along here? There's also the law of diminishing returns. How many plays that say the government's policies are fantastic would you want to go and watch in a year? What defence is there against that, what awareness of it even, on the part of the SAC? With Magnus Linklater—an appointee of the previous administration—the arts suddenly became an opportunity to *negotiate* a salary straight from the word go. For everybody else its take it or leave it.

JK I suppose with myself when I wrote to Magnus Linklater I also wanted things to be on record. So I don't really regret all the time I've spent, because I have this correspondence here and the idea of making it known like just now. Plus nobody can say I didn't try, like when I tell people in the States I can't get a play on and they look at me, well, here it is, I was stopped at this level and that level, this is me being stopped. I still can't get a play done at a place like The Traverse without doing a clown routine for the bastards, and I'm talking about for nothing, no wages.

WC Maybe you didn't really see it but at the time of the Booker Prize a lot of the coverage—like the *Times* and so on—would say it's an insult to the Booker Prize, you get Waugh or Julia Neuberger or Greer, somebody like that and their tirade of gibberish. But it must be quite effective. In some ways it colours some people's views of your work.

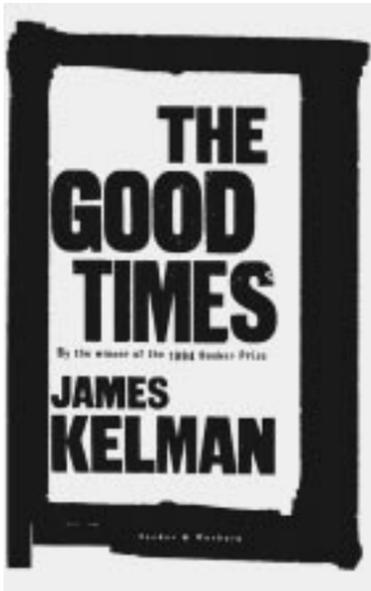
JK Yeah...well it did up here too, MPs obviously, they took the Neuberger line and supported the hostility against me. Brian Wilson and other ones, Donald Dewar, they attacked, every Labour MP who opened his mouth—apart from Gordon Brown, he was the only one I saw that came out in print without attacking me. Like *The Glasgow Herald* as well, after I won the thing just about the entire bunch that write for it came out and attacked, they all found their own wee way of doing it, it was like tossing coconuts, it was so bad the fucking editor was reduced to defending me, Arnold Kemp. What was interesting too was that bodies like the Saltire Society attacked. They just took the Neuberger line on language as having some truth in it. I remember the quote from the Saltire Society was something like "Oh yes, Scottish writers tend to shoot themselves in the foot." Something like that. So here you've got people who are directly associated with contemporary writing in Scotland just taking up that uncritical hostile position to a Scottish writer, basically on the word of an English tabloid, and you would have that hostility from a lot of the Scottish educational system, yeah, and people involved with the SNP of course, they came out and attacked the novel as well, Paul Scott...

WC What because everyone else was?

JK Perhaps it was that. It was also because the conventional wisdom being peddled was that my work was "primitive writing" and they wanted to be seen as being on the side of "matters of the intellect" or something, the SNP, they didn't want to be seen as 'parochial'! They were wanting to be seen as mature persons, they're big enough to attack a Scottish work written in a Scottish kind of working class dialect bla bla bla... It's part of that colonial mentality again, inferiorisation, plus the usual anglocentric attitudes from the Scottish establishment. That would have been part of the crap that was going on from them, I don't know. One of the points that you were making earlier in relation to Thatcher and 1979, there certainly were shifts in the arts. One of the ways it happened during the next ten years was the way funding went, American style Corporatism...

WC The "if the private sector aren't funding you we're not funding you" routine...

JK ...the whole attitude of Ian McGregor and the people who came in the 70s. Remember the title



of McGregor's autobiography? *The Enemies Within*. A typical Thatcher/Reagan Cold War line. But before the Thatcher government we were already being put into that way of thinking so it's a mistake to say "Thatcherism". But between that and also as a way to control the arts—move it out of the public sector and into the private sector as a means to suppress or censor etc. BP [British Petroleum] was one of the major sponsors of theatre, they had the Young Director of the Year awards and so on. So as soon as you have groups taking control like that, funding becomes a functional thing. There's obviously ways in which slowly but surely avant garde theatre—never mind left-wing, radical political stuff—will slowly but surely...

WC ...know they're not wanted.

JK What's wanted is the Kings and Lyceum Theatre, the Citizens... Shakespeare and P.G. Wodehouse, foreign writers and Noel Coward, pantomimes—and style as well, what's cool, can I join the gang, give us a fucking Nike stripe. But what I was going to say is it is an error to fall into that way of thinking that says how before 1979 things were okay. It's crap. What you're talking about, the 7:84

company, Wildcat, that sort of thing... Really, it was just what you would say Labour Party. And it was probably Manifesto Labour Party, it wasn't even Tribune. None of that stuff was left-wing at all, not if you step outside the Labour Party. In some ways it was really reactionary theatre. As far as they were concerned, political theatre...as a musician friend of mine used to say... "If you walked out, sang a song and said Fuck the Queen, then you'd get described as political theatre, and you'd get funding." That was what it was about at that period. Or so he said, I don't actually believe you could've said that. It was mainly shit though. Real radical art, genuine left-wing art, I don't think it was a possibility. There was nothing much going on then. Maybe not all shite. But as far as being at the cutting edge of literature, christ, theatre's so old fashioned, it was then and it is now, compared to straight prose fiction, give us a break... No. Whereas it might be nice to see maybe John Byrne's work, *The Slab Boys* or something, it's not ever going to be accused of being too radical. Or like John McGrath's work. It has a place and all that but it's surely not going to be regarded as radical theatre! Or is it, who knows. You had a lot of pseudo stuff then, as you still get, like Scottish movies it's full of pseudo left-wing stuff. It's "working class"—it gets sold as that anyway, so called working class—and that gets equated with left-wing. But is it? A lot of it's just old fashioned naturalism, and naturalism is only a sort of weird fantasy. In literature that kind of stuff was out of date in the early 1950s for christ sake but this is what gets supported and funded in the year 2000 in the World of Drama, theatre and movies. It's fucking hopeless, apart from one or two exceptions, okay.

WC So you're saying you're never going to get a play on in Scotland?

JK The Tron theatre didn't even reply to the letters we sent them. Maybe the Arches would have been interested, they did *One-two-hey*. But we just felt this particular play should go to particular places. Theatres are different, the spaces are different. I remember that play of mine *Hardie and Baird*, it would have been great to see it at the Tron. I

couldn't imagine it at the Arches but who knows. It ran two weeks at the Traverse and it was selling out, and then that was that, it just finished, it never went anywhere else, it just died a death. I found that amazing. I know at that time in Glasgow...I'm sure nobody in theatre wanted to be at loggerheads with the Labour Party and Glasgow District Council—a major funding body—and that would've been that, putting a play of mine on, because of the situation at that time. Myself and you and a few others were anathema in those days Billy, Glasgow 1991...

WC Not just at that time!

JK Of course, and they've got longer memories than us. There's only been two plays of mine ever on in Glasgow, then the wee revival of *The Busker* a couple of years ago, the same company that were wanting to do this new one that's caused the bother. There would have been no chance of *Hardie and Baird* playing there in 1991. But maybe it wasn't political at all, nobody's got a right to get a play on, including me. I've got three plays just now, new ones, the one we've been talking about plus another two. Where do I go with them. I don't blame people like the Tron or the Citizens for not trying to stage my work because maybe they just don't want to stage it and they're entitled to that. In relation to what you're saying, I could see them putting on *Hardie and Baird* after I'm dead.

WC What because it's historical?

JK Yeah probably, that makes it safe. A couple of critics were amazed there was so much religion in it, they thought it was too much. But maybe that would make the Labour Party feel even more safe, if it was just religion, they would think there was no politics. I don't really know what's going on in Scottish theatre these days, I don't go very much. It's not just Scotland of course, it's elsewhere in the UK. A lot of things have happened. People down south are worried as well, it's not even politically radical, or experimental theatre, sort of "mainstream radical" where they're just trying to put on a new play or something.

WC Certainly there has been depressing changes in theatre and I think a lot of this is due to notions of nationality. The Arts Council want to devolve power—and that's quite laudable in some respects—but all that comes down to is you cut touring companies and rep. because you don't have a national body to encourage that. The National Companies receive about half the total funding budget. Moves that came in the wake of the Audit report which castigated all the big Lottery projects—it was really the Tories' appointees fault so you can't blame the present administration, well you never can, can you? perhaps that's why they change. Well it all centred on the Royal Opera House in '97, the failings there and the vacuum that created in the Arts Council, the ACE was on the brink of collapse. This occurred as the new government came in with all their new ideas as to where the money should flow. A lot of people react against them but for fuck's sake they gave these people millions and when they needed more they gave them more. But a lot of that was obviously politically motivated. Opera got the money, but they did it through unusual ways and got caught and fell out at a bad time. Important people had their chance first. They blew it. That's what happened. The report showed that the big companies fucked things up for the wee ones. Meanwhile a lot of cuts were made and the entire ACE Drama committee just packed it in, which saved them getting rid of them. I don't understand these resignations. They should have stayed and said "We're going to make life fucking difficult for you bastards," but they just resigned.

JK Are they not part of the career structure themselves, part of that group? I'm resisting using the term 'class'.

WC No. They're a committee to create the illusion of democratic decision-making. They have no power really. They realised that. That's the real reason why they resigned. Minutes were being withheld from them—the usual thing—decisions were taken behind people's backs.

JK I always feel that these kind of committees are doing their bit for their own kind of class.

WC That's certainly a motivation. It's all got to be seen as "we're all in it together."

JK If you think about the dispensation of Arts Council money in terms of class, the artists in a sense tend to be treated as working class. One of the ways that operates is like—take the £25,000 "Creative Scotland" bursary, the best I've ever seen for Scotland—the money would be the equivalent of an excellent working-class wage, a top tradesman. Whereas the bureaucrats are getting a middle class wage, an officer's wage, probably that starts from the £25,000 or just below. The arts administrators are the cultural officers, paid at the middle class level, but the artists get a working class wage, a hundred quid for a writer's fee, it's like an emergency call out for a plumber, a writer-in-residency, it's working class dough, fair enough. Part of it gets carried through with entire groupings so Scottish Opera, or Scottish Ballet or big Scottish theatres maybe, they get treated in middle class ways whereas other groups aren't, they'll be treated in a working class kind of way where they'll get the crumbs and fight for scraps, "community art".

WC TAG Theatre did commission an Edwin Morgan play then the SAC cut TAG's money. There are divisions of labour, but even the notion of being an artist and a writer. You know 'art critics should work for a nice responsible magazine', but I think there are tiers within tiers as well. Surely the lowest of the low are the poets and visual artists.

JK I don't think so. Well, it depends...

WC In Scotland?

JK Well it's often assumed that if you're a poet you're an academic or you're making a good income anyway. Robert Crawford or Eddie Morgan, Douglas Dunn. An interesting thing to look at is the level of award that Tom Paulin got in England, to go away and write a poem or work at a poem, he got about 75 grand, something like that, to go away for a year's sabbatical. Because he is assumed to be on their upper middle class level. In some establishment quarters they see a poet as somebody who is sort of dilettante—I hate that term, but to define it economically... These kind of poets have a huge income anyway in terms of the day-to-day work they do, and they create art in their spare time... So not the lowest of the low, the opposite from scum.

WC Well I think there's something in what I'm saying.

JK Yeah, I'm not generalising, most poets get treated badly

WC If I think about the visual arts, and I go into an art gallery, say the CCA in Glasgow. There's going to be a person sitting inside behind the desk, now I know that's an artist, that's somebody who's just left art school. And they're sitting there getting paid what, a fiver? Its almost like they're on display, "look, this is what happens to you if you become an artist," as if they are in the public stocks or left hanging on the gallows at the at the entrance to a city. Then there's the serious artist having an exhibition, but they're probably not really getting any money. Then there are all these people who hang the shows, they will probably be artists on the dole who also sit at the desk. Maybe people aspire to this sort of thing. It's replicated throughout all the major cities in Britain. Peculiarly everybody's getting paid, the person who cleans etc., except for artists. In the visual arts that's the way it works. Until as you say, you get to a certain level where you cross some kind of class aspiration thing...

JK Sometimes no, you think that's the case, but then it comes back and haunts you, as with this latest thing, you might get to a level but you never make that crossing, all the stuff you've done as an artist, as a writer, it's not opening these sorts of doors at all, you're still fighting all the time, I'm talking about just to do your work. So, you're back to—well...to introduce other people into that equation, I don't particularly want to, but if I was thinking really off the top of my head it would be people like Alasdair [Gray], Tom [Leonard] and Agnes [Owens], Jeff Torrington, Janice Galloway, even Crichton Smith before he died, people who either have no money to get on with things or else still have to chase around. There's no harm in artists like having to earn a living etc. but I don't see why at a certain stage they still have to be chasing around the country for paltry eighty quids here and a hundred quid there, people who have



produced all that great work. I think that's a scandalous thing. Alasdair not being able to finish *The Book of Prefaces* because he didn't have the money, meanwhile the Arts Council are dishing out...I mean where the fuck are the...who's getting it? Where does all the money go when someone like Alasdair, he couldn't finish the 'Prefaces' at that time because he didn't have enough money to get him through another year, he had to find private sponsoring, what's the fucking Arts Council for. These kind of questions which I don't really want to get into. Tom chasing up and down to England every week to survive, and Janice couldn't even do that, having a kid, and of course Jeff couldn't, and Freddie [Anderson] who's in his mid 70s. That brings you into other areas.

WC The funding culture, the Arts Council stuff: its obviously a deeply bourgeoisie, middle-class, don't rock the boat, status quo values...that's it.

JK And also Billy, the rent boy thing, that point you made—for them ultimately there is no belief whatsoever in art. And somebody whether it's myself, as with the theatre carry-on, it's how they have absolutely no belief in what you do. They put no value in the art you create. They still think that if they were to give you a bursary for example, it's just Kelman or Gray is getting £10,000...

WC You'd see the error of you're ways...

JK They would just...no, it's just how for them they're giving you ten thousand quid and somehow you're "getting away with something", you're just getting the money, it's not for anything, it's not even old rope, it's just a game, there's no value in what you do. There's no value in it, the Arts Council don't see it. Some people might talk about your work in a pub or something, yeah, the Arts Council officers know that, or maybe at least they'll see a book you've written on a shelf in a library, but they don't put any real value on the stuff you do, not in itself, they don't see it as art, not real art, there's no value in it

WC I don't think so. I don't think there is. If you look back to the original thinking with Keynes, it was Keynes that thought it up as an extenuation from ENSA, you know to help the troops (which gave us Stanley Baxter and Kenneth Williams), that was for the lower orders right. And CEMA was this thing which basically was designed to fund the big opera houses. The financial methodology was loans. It was never ever intended to be 'here's money on you go we will support you'...

JK Yeah that's a 70s thing.

WC Exactly. The notion of continuing funding. Now they're attacking that again. Keynes' notions are largely taken from an article in *The Listener*. His notion of artists were pretty muddled actually. The analogy is that they are like butterflies in a jar, give them money and they have freedom. It's quite flowery, apolitical...no social responsibility whatsoever. If they do still believe that they have also come to believe that if you let the butterfly out of the jar it'll go straight to the pub. That's what they think. If you give artists money they will spend it on their lives [laughter] they'll waste it, they'll pay bills with it. There is an anomaly there. I think at a very high level in the arts they have got to rediscover that the values of what we would call the 'counter-culture', all these things that were wrongfully ditched by the establishment, actually revived art. They refuse to deal with certain sets of issues because they call their own roles into question. Until they address these sorts of things and stop putting nutcases in charge because they're 'good businessmen' I can't see anything changing and remember they're doing themselves out of a job. Look at the BBC for instance. It's ethos has been commercialised. So it will compete with all these commercial imperatives. If that's what it's doing then why am I paying the license? It will only do-in the whole basis of the thing. You pay your license fee so that it *doesn't* have to be ruled by commercial imperatives and it's the same with art's funding. I can't see any real way in a 'modern democracy' where they could say "we're going to have this fund which will force people to go along with the government's hastily constructed views on culture." That just doesn't make any sense. I want to believe there's a chance for them. I support the idea of an Arts Council in the same way I support the concept of the BBC. If you look at the ACE's website it says we will try and challenge this 'historical bias': they're penitent. But they're

right for the wrong reasons, they're just saying that because they're told to say it. They actually admit historical failure. But they're still not going to change things. Departments and individuals within the Arts Council are very different, but I don't think I've ever read anything which honestly conveys what it's like to encounter the sheer crippling madness of the bureaucracy...most people just give up.

JK You know I fought that damn thing for nine months, nine months wasted energy.

WC ...yeah see there's the time scale of these things. The day in day out...

JK One of these letters I wrote took about five or six days work—because I'm watching my back...you have to be careful... See I knew the attitude was going to be "Well what does he expect, he acts like the theatre's his or something I mean what right does he have to come walking in here!" That sort of attitude. These theatres are theirs, they belong to the admin officers, they've got nothing to do with us, the artists, that's the point. Well we knew that anyway that's just fucking banal. I landed myself in banalities for nine months. I got slapped down and put in my place. And how many times that has happened in the past for myself in this country, trying to get...you know...just get your work done.

WC What is the root cause?

JK What in other people's eyes?

WC Well if somebody as you say hasn't got a track record well they'll say maybe later. Somebody in the middle position who's getting treated like shit can themselves say 'aye maybe one day'...

JK When they're up there winning Scottish Writer of the Year Awards! ...No but it is outrageous. So just to try and get it made public, that this is the reality here, this is what we're actually talking about, I can't get a play on for fucking nothing, this is what it is like to be a writer in Scotland. None of that is discussed. Meanwhile we get the usual crap from *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, or *Scotland on Sunday*, attacking writers about this...what's that one by Tom, their "feather bedded life of luxury..."

WC Yeah 'they're all getting funded and they're all moaning'. But that's just sad wankers who haven't got a clue...

JK Well they do have a clue...

WC What are you trying to tell me that they're saying this to create a...

JK Well some of the media are, yeah. And attacking people in a very underhand way. Just about every time I read a column about contemporary Scottish literature in *The Herald* we're getting attacked, in one way or another. I'm talking about the exciting stuff—all the reactionary crap gets supported. Look how they attacked Janice Galloway and Alasdair Gray in *The Scotsman*, or was it *Scotland on Sunday*? And when Janice and Alasdair replied they didn't even publish the letter they sent but again they attacked them, and they used bits of the letter for that purpose, imagine it, cowardly bastards. This is the kind of thing they do in Scotland. Imagine these little shits attacking writers like Alasdair and Janice! Christ almighty. Magnus Linklater is a former editor of *The Scotsman* anyway, but that's the Andrew Neil team nowadays and Linklater is nowhere near as bad as that, I don't think so, if he had been I wouldn't have written to him in the first place. Who knows. He's an ordinary kind of right-wing guy, I suppose, in a position of authority. Another one! But take people like...what's her name...writes for *The Herald* and does stuff all over the place, for the BBC... Her that's in the Labour Party, she's attacked me in the past because of Workers City, her that always backed up Pat Lally and whoever, the three stooges...

WC Oh what Ruth Wishart!

JK Yeah, people like Ruth Wishart, who have quite a strong position within the arts...

WC ...She's the Labour Party hatchet for the arts...

JK But these people really are the enemies in a sense, they try to hurt you and all that, and they

succeed. I don't get so hurt because I'm maybe in a stronger position, I regard myself as quite strong, and yet for people who are less...in a worse economic position...they can get hurt really badly you know, they get stopped, they can't do their work. At least I know next year will not be as bad because I'll be in Texas, Texas half the year, England the other half.