

Bob Boyers of *SALMAGUNDI* literary magazine, USA, interviews Gerda Stevenson about her play *Federer Versus Murray*. Published Spring, 2012.
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- 1- When Peg Boyers and I saw your play performed at the Edinburgh Festival In August of 2011 we felt at once that it was an extraordinary work, and wondered for how long you've been writing plays.

*I've been writing plays for BBC Radio 4 for many years now. Radio drama is a hugely popular form of drama in the U.K. I started off abridging novels, then dramatizing them (including great Scottish classics such as Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*.) Then I progressed to writing my own original plays for radio. But I hadn't written drama for stage until six years ago, when I co-wrote, edited and directed a large-scale community play all about the Second World War. I was a member of a local writers' group at the time, and we applied for funding to produce this community play called *Pentlands At War*. It was based on the wartime memories of elderly local residents, whom we interviewed. We had a professional production team, a cast of 34 amateur actors (the age of the performers ranging from 7 to 70!) and a live jazz band. I staged it in traverse in our local village hall. We played to packed houses for 4 nights.*

- 2- *SALMAGUNDI* has had much to do in recent years with the films of Margarethe von Trotta, who began her career in film as an actress, then went on to write the scripts of her films and to direct them, though she didn't act in them. In Edinburgh, of course, you starred in your own play, and also directed it. Which came first for you, the acting, the directing or the writing?

The acting came first. As a child, I was always acting. My father, the composer/pianist Ronald Stevenson, had a long correspondence with the great 20th century theatre designer, Edward Gordon Craig (the son of Ellen Terry).

Craig gave my father lots of his original, exquisite woodcuts. I have one of them in my study, of the great French actor, Talma. He's sitting inside a carriage, and it's entitled "Talma Rides to Brunoy."

Mum and Dad used to take me with my brother and sister to the theatre in Edinburgh, and this became my passion.

And I got involved in plays at primary school – we had a most remarkable school janitor, who used to direct musicals at school, and he also painted the back-cloths. He'd let me sit alongside him in the gym hall, and I would direct with him, and then leap up onto the stage for my scenes. This extraordinary man used to paint pictures – oil paintings – in his tiny janitor's room, and I'd go in there during break time to watch him working at his canvasses.

Nowadays, such a relationship between a child and a middle-aged school janitor would be deemed perverted and dangerous, but he was an inspiration to me.

One Christmas, my parents made papier mache glove puppets for me, and commissioned a local joiner to build a puppet theatre, with curtains on a pull cord mechanism. And I remember my dad once sent home from Germany, where he was touring as a concert pianist, a most thrilling parcel of beautiful German puppets, and the hand-written script of a play he'd penned for me and my friend to perform with these wonderful characters. We went on to make our own puppets, and wrote our own puppet plays, which we'd put on at local children's birthday parties, to earn a bit of pocket money.

*Then, as a teenager, I joined the local amateur drama club. Eventually I studied acting at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. But all through my childhood I was writing poetry – childish stuff – and stories, which I illustrated. My book of children's stories – *The Candlemaker & Other Stories* – was published in the late 1980s. I also spent a lot of my youth drawing and painting portraits, and, at one point, thought I might go to art college instead of training as an actor. My father is a writer and broadcaster as well as a musician, so I was brought up with a very holistic approach to art, an understanding that all its forms are part of the same thing – particularly in theatre, which is the great combined art form.*

- 3- Would you describe “Federer vs. Murray” as political theatre, or would that epithet seem to you to betray in some way what you’ve tried to do there?

I don't think I would describe it as political theatre, although I agree there are political elements within the play. But it's not agitprop theatre. I wanted each character to have a valid point of view, and I wanted to show how political events can affect the lives of 'ordinary' men and women. (Of course, no-one is ordinary!) So it's about that link between the personal and the political. The big fight between the husband and wife in the play is not about politics, primarily. Although Jimmy is coming up with political arguments that relate to his understanding of the war in which his son died, and Flo is vehemently rebutting them, this scene is in fact about the profound sense of bereavement they are experiencing.

- 4- Your play caused the audience in Edinburgh to laugh at several points, at both performances we attended, and in one conversation we had with friends who had seen the play with us we agreed that it is, in some respects at least, a very dark comedy. But a comedy. Does that accord with your sense of the work as well?

*Yes – it's definitely intended to be a tragi-comedy. I love that style of theatre where one moment you're laughing, and the next you're crying – probably because it's close to life. I wanted to bring in elements of absurd comedy at extreme moments – I love Vaclav Havel's approach, for instance, injecting absurd hilarity into really desperate human situations. Atholl Fugard's *A Place With the Pigs* comes to mind – a great play, terribly funny and very painful. And Alan Ayckbourn does that too, in his plays. I also wanted to take the audience on a roller-coaster with the characters, wanted the audience to feel the characters' pain, but then you've got to allow a release. That way, I think the characters become more compelling. The wit between Jimmy and Flo*

is essential to their relationship – when times are good (not necessarily times that we see much of!) they make each other laugh. They enjoy sparring – they are a very verbal couple.

- 5- The character you play is, of course, very complicated and not at all easy to love. Flo is not only angry and bitter but also something less than a warm and sympathetic helpmate to her husband, whom she ceaselessly demeans and taunts. Did you fear, in writing the part and deciding how to play it on stage, that Flo might so alienate your audience that she would never be able to win them back and that this would make it hard for them to care about developments in the marriage and in the life of the play as a whole?

Your reaction to Flo is very interesting – it's much more extreme than I've heard before! People tell me they're moved by the play. I don't think audiences would be moved if they didn't care about the characters.

I like Flo – she has a dry wit, which matches Jimmy's, and she's intelligent and caring. But yes – it was a deliberate choice on my part to make her a deeply angry woman – not a particularly attractive quality – someone who has been so hurt that she has closed down, and spends her time rejecting her husband, blaming and hurting him. I wanted to push that quite far, and then, in the last scene, when we discover the full horror of how her son has been killed, we then understand the root of her pain.

A number of themes sparked Flo's character and the play for me: one was an article I read – an interview with a Russian woman, a widow, whose young soldier son had been killed in the war in Chechnya. He loved to play his guitar. She was determined to get his body back, so that she could bury him. After several visits to Chechnya, where she met with Chechen commanders, she finally managed to have his body returned to Russia. His head was missing. Her anger came through in the interview – an anger that was quite frightening. I didn't want Flo to be as irreparably damaged as this woman seemed to be, but the story lodged with me, and her fierce anger fascinated me.

*Then there was another story – twenty years ago, a man I met told me that his relationship with his wife never recovered from the death of their little boy. She simply couldn't talk about it, and he needed to – they both needed to, but it was too unbearable for her to do so. She closed down, and they became isolated from one another, started looking to others for solace, so much so that eventually they divorced. I met this same man again for a second time, just before I wrote *Federer Versus Murray*, and he told me the same story again, and with just as much pain. By this time, his wife had died. They never did talk about it. He hadn't been able to move on – he'd needed to share the mutual grief with his wife in order to find a way forward, but that hadn't happened, and he was still in the same place that he'd been in when I'd met him twenty years before.*

I also knew another couple who had suffered the loss of a child, and the mother had moved into the child's room, which became a kind of shrine.

I suppose I was drawn to the theme because my own first baby died.

On top of the extreme stress of bereavement, Flo is exhausted – she works hard in a low-paid job, as an auxiliary nurse. She's worried about how they are going to manage on her meager income, now that Jimmy is unemployed. (My mother was an auxiliary nurse for years, until she took her full nurse's training.)

Also, Flo's elderly mother is frail and needs daily help with personal care, a good deal of which falls to Flo.

Another reason for the gulf between Jimmy and Flo is their different patterns of work, which keep them apart – she's on night shifts, and he's on day shifts. So they actually see very little of one another, even although they live in the same small flat.

*The other element I've incorporated is the art of the insult! It's a very Scottish trait to express your affection for someone by insulting them. In fact, we have a term – *Flyting* – which is a contest of insults. I'm not saying that Flo is not relentlessly needling Jimmy – she certainly is – but her needling does contain this element of affectionate insulting, which also has a comic slant to it.*

- 6- In the play Flo has a gentleman caller whom we never actually meet, though he is permitted to create suspicion and uneasiness in her husband and in the end has to be discussed and dismissed so that the couple can try at least to rebuild their marriage. Early on the gentleman caller is useful for generating some laughter, but soon he seems rather more important as a sign of something in Flo, though it is not quite clear what that something is. Would you speak a bit about your decision to use this invisible character in the play and perhaps also about what his presence suggests is going on with Flo?

In a long-term relationship, one can fantasize, particularly during the difficult times, about going off with someone else who you feel would understand you, and might fulfill what your marriage lacks. I was interested in that line between fantasy and reality, where the ground is shifting. Flo isn't sure of her feelings for the gentleman caller – she's at a crisis point in her marriage, and she's finding herself investing more and more in this other man's company – if not in a great deal of time spent with him, at least in her head.

I felt it was dramatically useful, and true to life, for this off-stage character to be shadowy, representing that dark area within a marriage, where an unspoken threat emerges, and trust can break down. A threat to stability, a force on the outside pushing in – potential war. The sense of claustrophobia in the relationship between Jimmy and Flo is important, and I felt that the tension of this claustrophobia would be intensified by allowing the outside world – represented by this shadowy character – to encroach. Off-stage characters and landscapes are hugely important in theatre – they can represent dreams, aspirations, nightmares, fantasy and reality.

- 7- Flo's husband is of course also a mixed bag, some of the time feisty and amusing, at other moments somewhat complacent and unattractive. The fact that he is out of work might, in another work, make him seem simply sad, and we do even here feel for him, especially when Flo tears into him and reminds him that it is her income that now supports the

household. But his political rants and obsessions are really quite compelling, hard not to take seriously, especially as they come from a deep well of anguish, reflections, all of them, of this man's sense that his son's life has been sacrificed for nothing. And so my question is: How do you feel about this character? Is he, for you, an essentially sympathetic character, not simply pathetic and lost, not simply *l'homme moyen sensuel*, but a vital and compelling figure, in his small way actually quite impressive? This was a question, I might mention, that our little Edinburgh crowd was divided about.

I like Jimmy, and I feel he has dignity. He's funny, kind and intelligent. He has an easy-going nature, likes to laugh, but he also has a keen sense of justice. He's a gentleman – a tolerant democrat, and a pacifist by nature. He doesn't challenge Flo directly about her relationship with the gentleman caller, because he believes that it's up to Flo to tell him if there's something he needs to know. In other words, he insists, on principle, on the foundation of trust in their relationship, even when he senses it is threatened.

But, within all of that, he's still the traditional (ubiquitous) male who sits on the sofa, while his wife tidies up around him!

He hasn't had much ambition in life – not for himself, anyway, but he does have ambition for his children. Like Flo, he cares about the world. He's a bit of an autodidact, interested in Scottish history, but has always had a lowly job, and sees the funny side of things, including the fact that he's worked most of his life in a sanitary ware factory. He's a bit of a dreamer – would love to travel – the Swiss Alps have always attracted him, and he'd probably have liked to have been in a jazz band, but it never happened.

Like me, he's also a keen follower of tennis, and a serious fan of Roger Federer, the great Swiss tennis player. He has become unemployed just as Wimbledon has started, which cheers him up no end! Just as Flo has begun to invest in her relationship with the gentleman caller, so Jimmy is investing in his imaginary connection with Roger Federer – in his mind, Roger has become something of a substitute son.

I deliberately gave Jimmy and Flo humble jobs – they are at the very lower end of society in economic terms. (My own grandparents on my father’s side were of this class – granddad worked on the railways as a fireman, and granny worked in the Lancashire cotton mills from the age of 12.) Flo and Jimmy have little power and no money, and their lives are dramatically affected by global economics.

With the death of his son, life has smacked Jimmy in the solar plexus. Flo can’t talk about their loss, so he has buried himself in reading up about the war in which his son died, trying to make sense of it, devouring newspaper articles, watching different news channels on TV, listening to the radio. He is obsessive about this research, and has become politically engaged. (My own husband, the Gaelic poet Aonghas MacNeacail, is a newspaper addict, passionate about politics, and, like Flo, I’m constantly fighting back the tsunami of newspapers, which threaten to inundate our house!) Jimmy’s political engagement has led him to the view that the war in Afghanistan is futile. He believes that his son has died for nothing, and he can’t bear it.

- 8- Yours is a very full one-act play, performed in about an hour. But it contains all sorts of things that might have been further developed, other characters who might well have been introduced and given speaking parts – not merely the gentleman caller but the daughter who is often referred to, and Flo’s mother. Did you know from the first that this was to be a one-act play and that you wanted to work with only the two characters?

Good question. I thought about this a great deal when writing Federer Versus Murray. Off-stage characters are not uncommon in theatre - full-length plays included – take Godot, for example!

There is a third character, of course, who appears as the saxophonist - the couple’s son. I was interested in the idea of there being a second child, because it gives another dimension to Jimmy and Flo’s relationship, and I did consider introducing the daughter, Mairi, as an on-stage character, which would have

been perfectly possible. But I felt that the daughter's absence could intensify the parents' loneliness, increasing that sense of claustrophobia and extreme isolation. Mairi doesn't like to visit the family house very much any more, because it has become a deeply sad, broken home. She's trying to get on with her life, studying at university. We do learn that Mairi communicates better with her father than with her mother.

I felt that it was dramatically useful to have an additional pressure on Flo in the background - her frail elderly mother who is in need of care. This scenario is true of so many families, and often it falls to the women to plug the gap when it comes to caring for the elderly.

But there was also a pragmatic reason for writing a play of one hour with a small cast. (I wrote it when I was awarded a writer's bursary by the Scottish Arts Council.) I knew that if I stuck to this structure, I would be more likely to get the play on at Oran Mor, in Glasgow, in that venue's already legendary lunchtime theatre season – A Play, a Pie and a Pint. Within less than a decade, Oran Mor has become the undisputed home of new writing for theatre in Scotland. Under the artistic direction of the brilliant producer/writer/director David MacLennan, it's a runaway success – a hub of activity, a new play nearly every week - 37 plays per annum, and that number is increasing this year. The audiences are wonderful – it's nearly always packed out, and there is no house style in terms of writing or direction, which is so refreshing. I have directed eight productions at Oran Mor, including Federer Versus Murray.

Could or should my play be developed further, bringing the gentleman caller and Mairi the daughter on stage? That's a bit like asking me if I'd like to change the colour of my child's eyes; the play is what it is, and has a life of its own now – Glasgow, 2010, Edinburgh 2011, and now New York, 2013, where it will be playing at 59E59 Street, as part of Scotland Week.

- 9- Of course you've heard from numbers of people what we heard when we began telling our friends about the terrific play we discovered in Edinburgh, namely, the suspicion that it is a play about professional

tennis. No, it's not, we've routinely assured our interlocutors. Mustn't draw conclusions on the basis of a title. And yet the tennis is a part of the action, both athletes, Federer and Andy Murray, with important connections to whatever it is you wish to convey. And so perhaps you would speak a bit about your title and about the decision to orchestrate the main action of the play largely, though not exclusively, around the televised tennis matches.

As I've said, I love tennis, and I'm a Roger Federer fan. I admired Bjorn Borg for many years, and when he retired from the game, I thought there could never be anyone as great. Until Roger came along! Wimbledon is genuinely a highlight of the year for me. It can be real theatre!

I was chatting with a friend, and the subject of tennis came up. He told me that he loved watching Wimbledon, and that his father, who had worked in the Glasgow shipyards, had been a keen amateur tennis player. This information lodged itself in the back of my mind, and began to float about with the other themes I've already mentioned.

The thing about Roger Federer is that he is not only an artist on the court – his range of strokes is remarkable – he is also an absolute gentleman. He never allows his emotions to take over, and he is always so gracious with his opponents, in victory and defeat. I began to think about the nature of sport. When you watch a really great five set match, it can become an epic battle for both players. I couldn't stand the way John MacEnroe used to behave on court – his anger and aggression was so negative, so destructive to what I feel should be a pure fight that obeys a set of rules and principles.

Implicit within this theme, through the character of Jimmy, is a questioning of the behaviour of our political leaders.

I realized that Federer's nationality gave me another possibility to work with – Switzerland is a neutral country. It can be beneficial, in long term conflict – I was thinking of Jimmy and Flo's marriage, but it's also true of nations - to move into neutral territory in order to find a resolution.

And, of course, I should say I knew that tennis could also give me many possibilities for comedy!

Scots people are very proud of Andy Murray - currently one of the highest ranked tennis players in the world. As the character of Jimmy was developing in my imagination, it struck me that he'd be the kind of person who would support a player for the pure quality of his or her game, and not because of nationalistic fervour. So then the idea of tennis as a metaphor began to develop further in my mind - warring countries, and ways of behaving in conflict. It occurred to me that tennis could provide a structure for my drama: Jimmy would support Federer, and Flo would support Murray, and the five scenes could be a kind of five set match.

The title embodies relevant elements within the play, and works for me as a metaphor - these names represent two small nations, one which is historically neutral, one which has been colonized by its larger neighbour, England; and it's also two top international players competing in a global arena.

*However, I suppose there's no reason to assume that anyone else should make these connections! It is possible that people could be put off from coming to see my play, because they think it's about tennis, but, equally, you could argue that there's potential here to bring in a new audience - not that I ever thought about that in choosing the title. But I remember seeing a show here in Scotland, called *Sunshine on Leith*, which is the title of a song by a famous Scottish band called *The Proclaimers*, and it's also the anthem of Edinburgh's Hibernian football team. That production attracted an audience of football and *Proclaimers* fans, people who'd never been to the theatre before, and that's so refreshing - not to be playing to the usual audience of committed culture vultures. So it's swings and roundabouts, really - you win some, you lose some. One thing about *Federer Versus Murray* that I've observed, is the diversity of its audience - it seems to appeal to a breadth of generations, young and old, and also speaks to intellectuals, academics and artisans. I'm happy with that - a lot of theatre on offer is increasingly highly conceptual, elitist, even.*

To be honest, it never occurred to me that I should call the play anything else. And I don't think the title's misleading – there's enough tennis in the play to please the tennis anoraks, and not too much to put off those who are not particularly interested in the sport. The box office staff at Oran Mor in Glasgow told me that when people phoned up to ask what was on that week and were told the title of the play, they invariably said "Oh, that sounds good!" People in Britain are very aware of who Federer and Murray are, especially if you put the names together. The play sold very well in Glasgow and in Edinburgh, and I hope it will do so in New York. But I'm also aware that there is a history of titles not necessarily transferring culturally across the Atlantic.

- 10- The most harrowing moments in the play occur when the two characters have painted their faces and seem briefly to have reached some real if only temporary comfort with one another, only to explode in terrifying violence. Violence that brings things to a head in a way we only then realize we've been waiting for. Did you know that you were heading for that when you moved in writing the script to have the characters paint their faces?

This question goes back to your point about Flo's anger – very early on in the writing process, I knew that I wanted the couple to have a horrible fight, with flags painted on their faces. There's something tribal and extreme about that image, and there's the possibility of dark comedy there, which I knew I wanted. And it's a theatrical idea – I mean, it wouldn't work on radio! I've always found it very funny, and touching, and yet, potentially scary, when watching Wimbledon on TV, I see those people in the crowd with their country's flag painted on their faces in support of their nation's player. I knew I wanted to stage a war between a man and a woman, a kind of microcosm of something bigger. When nations (or large groups of people), suffer loss, they experience bereavement, and can react savagely, illogically lashing out at the wrong

people. This is what Flo is doing. I wanted to take it right to the edge, and then pull back from the brink.

11- You write the play in Scots dialect, and will perhaps explain to us what drove that decision, and what dangers were entailed inevitably in that decision.

There was no alternative. I had decided that my characters were to be working class, urban people, at the lower end of the economic scale. Their speech had to reflect this – if it didn't, they wouldn't be believable. There isn't actually a great deal of dialect in the script – it's more a question of accent, really. But it absolutely would not work if Jimmy and Flo spoke some sort of 'Standard English.' We've moved very far from that old fashioned idea in British theatre, thank goodness – it's very common nowadays to read contemporary plays in different dialects of the British Isles. Federer Versus Murray has communicated to people from all over the world – I've had warm responses from Australians, Americans, French people, and we also got a great review in a Dutch newspaper. So I didn't really worry about limiting the audience when I was writing the dialogue in a Scottish dialect/accents – which I guess is what you mean by 'dangers.' There's an integrity that has to be adhered to in committing to the true voice of the characters.

12- As perhaps you will speak about the musical interludes, which can hardly seem as important to a reader of your play as to audience members in Edinburgh.

I love live music in theatre, and I had the idea of creating a third character who would have a history, and a relationship to the other two characters, but would only 'speak' through the music.

Like the gentleman caller, I wanted this character to be shadowy to begin with, to draw the audience into the drama. I wanted to somehow make the audience feel profound sorrow at the waste of a young life, a young man, who is gifted,

and in his prime. When I watch Roger Federer on a tennis court, I am amazed at the finesse, the skill and artistry. I wanted the audience to really feel the loss of Jimmy and Flo's son, and I thought I could perhaps make him specially gifted. My own son is a musician, and he told me a fascinating anecdote a few years ago: the British Army visited his school, as part of a recruitment drive. They sent an army jazz band along to the music department, in which my son was a pupil. He told me that these army musicians were absolutely brilliant, and, although he had no desire to join up, he could see that the prospect was tempting. You can gain terrific training in all sorts of fields in the army. Just after the musicians had departed, my son heard his teacher muttering, sotto voce: "Pity they didn't tell you that you could get killed."

That story stuck in my mind. When I was researching for the play (I read a lot of material about the war in Afghanistan, and interviewed some army personnel), I went onto the British Army website, to look at their recruitment information. The first thing that came up was a photograph of a saxophonist. Initially, I wasn't sure how I would incorporate the character of the son as a musician into my play. But then it occurred to me that the scene changes were a tricky element, technically, because Jimmy and Flo need time to change in and out of costumes, have to bring props on and off, and there must also be a sense of time passing. That's when I got the idea of making the son, as the saxophonist, appear within the walls of his parents' flat, like a ghost, during the scene changes, and then, gradually make him become more and more real, until, just after the penultimate scene, while Jimmy and Flo are pulling a huge white sheet over the stage, like a shroud (which becomes the Swiss Alps, a kind of transcendental neutral territory), the son walks through the audience, dressed as a soldier, playing the sax. He becomes part of us – he is all our sons at this point, and he is playing that matchlessly beautiful ancient Scottish ballad "The Bonnie Earl o Murray," which has been referred to by Jimmy and Flo, in a kind of absurd, verbal comedy riff in the first scene, but now becomes a slow funeral march, the real thing, which might well be played by a Scottish soldier on the bagpipes, though we do it on tenor sax. This is a very well known ballad in Scotland, and the words are as heartbreaking as the melody:

*Ye Hielands and ye Lowlands,
O whaur hae ye been?
Ye hae slain the Earl o Murray
And laid him on the green.
He was a braw gallant
And he played at the ba'
And the Bonnie Earl o Murray
Was the flow'r amang them a'.*