

LET US PRAISE

Ena Lamont Stewart

By Liz Lochhead

Let us praise Ena Lamont Stewart. And let us praise **Men Should Weep**, her masterpiece. For, God knows, neither was celebrated enough in her lifetime.

"One evening in the winter of 1942 I went to the Theatre," she wrote, going on to describe a Road to Damascus moment and stating her ever-after credo. 'I came home in a mood of red-hot revolt against cocktail time, glamorous gowns and underworked, about-to-be-deceived husbands. I asked myself what I wanted to see on the stage and the answer was Life. Real Life. Real People."

In this big-hearted, breenging, brilliant play of hers we certainly have this, and we have it most abundantly. This play is a searing piece of social history. The poverty it documents is desperate, and it dares to document it via the lives of women, particularly that of her protagonist Maggie, no saint, no 'slum madonna', as she tholes the ordinary, everyday, epic, heroic, human struggle to survive and to keep those she loves alive.

John, her husband, is a good man, drawn with sympathy and with subtlety and humour and without cliché by Ena Lamont Stewart, but it's not his story. In other Glasgow Unity Theatre productions of this era it would have been axiomatic that the working man, or the tragically unworking man, as in John's case, would have been the centre of the drama. Instead we have a play by someone bold enough –revolutionary for her times, and still unusual enough to be remarkable in ours – to tell us Maggie's story and put the main focus on the lives of girls and women.

We get Maggie's loving, determinedly independent nippy sweetie loving sister Lily; Granny, worse than another wean, passed from pillar to post, from Maggie's already far-too-full tenement flat and life to Lizzie's, to the self-serving harridan sister-in-law who has, reluctantly, to take her turn; Maggie's grown-up daughter Jenny, desperate to get out of all this (and who can blame her?); right bad-lot Isa, the daughter-in-law from Hell; Maggie's neighbours, a Greek chorus of women without their own sorrows to seek; Maggie's wee Marina, a mouth from the bed recess; Maggie's Edie with her wide-open een and her ears flapping, drinking it all in. Here's where the energy in this drama lies, where we get all the laughs, the ripples of recognition, the rueful identification.

The men and the boys. Masculinity. This is what has to be dealt with. Managed. From the all-but emasculated by chronic unemployment John, a man who has fought and still has his own daily battles to fight, to the sons: grown-up, no-good Alec who has been, quite literally, spoiled by Maggie herself; greedy-for-life adolescent Ernest with his exuberant energies; baby Christopher, another mouth; Bertie with that cough that scares Maggie

so much she's been avoiding doing anything about it because she can't bear to face up to the cause of it.

Is it 'a feminist play'? Well, in this sense, yes, though I'd prefer to call it a deeply humane one that is telling the deeply female story. (One could argue the toss whether the title **Men Should Weep** refers to the male-of-the-species or to mankind in general. A Biblical quote? Sounds like it, but no amount of Googling's yielded the source.)

One of the big themes is the gender divide, the impossibility of love under late capitalism. For this is also a love story. The story of a marriage at the outset, against the odds, still sexual, even with (wild as a red hat!) romantic traces intact. Though how it will survive, this marriage, after all the shocking speech-and-action of the third act is played out, is an open question. Ena Lamont Stewart is, I feel, clear-eyed and humane enough, her characters pragmatic enough, to allow that in a play determined to tell the truth about life, it will go on.

Social History. Social Realism. Yes, but this play is bigger than that. A family drama as fundamental as that of the House of Atreus. About fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, and the eternal psycho-drama between them, whether played out in palace-hall or lowly claustrophobic tenement-room.

Fascinating to learn that Ena Lamont Stewart, long after the success – the mixed-if-considerable success of the first production (for not all audiences or critics, even female critics, were able to stomach a play with "eight women who the author has armed to their wisdom teeth and only two men, both weaklings," as one of those lady-hacks put it) – but, anyway, after the play had languished a long time unproduced, and with no immediate chance of a new production, Ena Lamont Stewart in 1976 rewrote radically the whole third act of her play.

This was a woman, a divorced parent who had brought up a boy single-handed, a gentle daughter of the manse, genteel and well-spoken herself, with, I'd argue, a great ear for the Glaswegian speech of her characters, if a shaky sense of the orthography of how to put it down on the page. She had written, in 1946, a play full of wonderful acute observation and comic robustness, whose ending nevertheless was of such relentless pessimism, piled such misery-upon-misery, that today we'd probably find ourselves laughing inappropriately.

However, thirty years later, fired by the new ideas of the times in a wild, poetic, most unladylike fashion, following truthfully the deep character, therefore the destinies, of her own dramatis personae, she wrote the soaring, searing ending we have today . . . with no immediate chance of a production. That came in 1982 when John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company did its now legendary **Clydebuilt** season and Giles Havergal of the Citz did his celebrated bold-and-Brechtian one. A revelation.

The faith of these good men mibbe mitigated somewhat, we hope, the long years of patronising sexism which had kept the play out of the repertoire. If that was what kept Ena's subsequent work out of James Mavor's (aka James Bridie's) Citizens Theatre. She was an uneven writer – as which of us are not? – and not a prolific one, but it can't have been right (if very Scottish) that a talent like hers should have been un-nurtured. And productions are the only nurturing of a playwright...

Anyway, Ena Lamont Stewart wrote one great Scottish play.

When Gregory Burke and the National Theatre of Scotland put on their legendary **Black Watch** and we had the sobering thrill of seeing, on stage, people whose lives we were unfamiliar with, they were only fulfilling her burning desire of 1942. "Life. Real Life, Real people."

Liz Lochhead
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