



Multi-media art house and production company boss looks to next quarter century fusing sound and vision

Artistic director Cathie Boyd is still Cryptic after all these years



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CATHIE Boyd didn't set out to spend her life ravishing people's senses when she moved to Glasgow more than a quarter of a century ago. Yet, as founder and artistic director of Cryptic, the internationally inclined self-styled multi-media art-house and production company she runs with producer Claire Moran and a crack hand-picked team, this is exactly what this human dynamo has done. The phrase wasn't hers. That came from then board member James Faulds at a time when branding was the thing. The phrase has stuck right through the company's colourful life, and is arguably more a reflection of the company's work now than ever before.

Statistically speaking – and Cryptic are good with statistics – the company has presented 172 productions, including 42 world premieres, seen across 29 countries. This has included major collaborations with the Latvian Radio Choir and composer Gavin Bryars, to more theatre-based pieces including versions of *Electra* and *The Trojan Women*, through to a sumptuous staging of Virginia Woolf's gender-bending *Orlando*.

More recently, Cryptic produced *Breaking Reverie*, Heather Lander and composer Michael Begg's exploration of the natural world at the Findhorn Bay Festival. It also organised *Portal*, artist Robbie Thomson and composer Alex Menzies' immersive perambulation through a reconstituted Clyde Tunnel. Cryptic also oversaw Kathryn Joseph's tour of her album, *When I Wake the Want Is*, in a music theatre piece directed by Josh Armstrong and featuring body architecture by Marketa Kratochvilova.

During this time, the company evolved from a music-theatre-based outfit to present work that fuses sound and vision in an experimental and expansive fashion. This is most evident today through *Sonica*, Cryptic's biennial festival of international visual sonic art, or sonic art for the visually minded, as the company style it. Founded in 2012, *Sonica* is a city-wide extravaganza in Glasgow and beyond. To date, the festival has presented more than 560 events by 240 artists across 12 countries. The next edition of *Sonica* will take place in autumn this year.

As Cryptic celebrates its 25th year, next week is also 10th anniversary of *Cryptic Nights*, the initiative set up to showcase emerging artists working between live music, visual and sonic art, film and new media. With *Cryptic Nights* alumni including composer Anna Meredith and artist Rachel Maclean, *Cryptic Nights* has presented



■ Cryptic's Cathie Boyd is refusing to let Brexit change how she operates. Picture: Louise Mather

over 270 artists in partnership with the CCA, where Cryptic has its office. This latest edition features *Watchtower* and *Origins*, a double bill of new works by Kin and Silent Chaos respectively. All of this activity is in keeping with the essence of Boyd's creative philosophy regarding Cryptic.

"I don't like looking backwards," she says. "I always look forwards. I still feel like Cryptic has only been around for five years, but I want the company to be around in another 25 years. By then it will hopefully have been passed on to someone else, and evolved again. That's what I'm aware of, and what I'm happy about what's happened with Cryptic is how it's constantly evolved over the years. It's very different to how it was when it started, and that unpredictability of Cryptic is one of the things that's important about it."

"What's important is the internationalism about what Cryptic does, and the risk-taking we do. That's all stayed with me, especially where the world is now. In an age of austerity, we will push artists, and take more risks."

This has been the case since Boyd first formed what was then Theatre Cryptic while a student in Glasgow at

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what was then the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

"It was the best equipped conservatoire in Europe," she says. "I was probably one of the few people there who already had an agent, but I decided I didn't want to be an actor. At the time, I only knew text-based theatre and kitchen-sink stuff, but I moved to Glasgow in 1990, when the whole European City of Culture programme was bringing all these international artists to Glasgow. Seeing all that, I couldn't believe you could tell a story through visuals, and I began to look at making work with a visual language."

With most homegrown theatre then fiercely naturalistic or else politically motivated agitprop, Boyd looked to different ways of making work.

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Boyd's first production came in 1991 with *The One-Sided Wall* – "I refuse to call it a student production" – which featured a young stage manager called Kate Dickie in the company, as well as a libretto sung by inmates of what was

then Barlinnie Special Unit.

A look at Brian Friel's play, *Lovers*, followed, after which Boyd "wrote to every famous person I knew asking for money. Kenneth Branagh, John Gielgud, all of them. I knew no-one else was going to give me the chance, and after 25 years it doesn't get any easier."

Other early work included a staging of Francois Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, an interpretation of Molly Bloom's erotic "yes" speech from James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses* as *Parallel Lines*, and Beckett *Time*, a multi-art festival drawn from the works of Samuel Beckett.

For all Boyd's interest in European literature, art and music, there are more personal drives which have shaped her. Boyd grew up in Belfast, where she was a child actor from the age of five. At school she took A Levels in French, politics and history, but had already started directing plays. She already had her sights set on elsewhere, and it was theatre and art that provided a route out.

"If you're growing up in Belfast during the Troubles, you want to get out as quickly as possible," she says. "When you live in a political climate as I did, where the tanks on the street and men in combat gear are almost invisible because they are so commonplace, my response with Cryptic was to do something that was the complete antithesis of that. I've never produced anything political. Everything I've ever done with Cryptic has been all about beauty and escape."

This is an attitude that arguably has its roots even further back.

"I never talk about personal stuff, but one thing I'll say, being adopted makes you very determined. I remember talking to Jackie Kay when I was directing her book, *The Adoption Papers*, for radio. I said to her, do you like the word 'No', and she said, no, I hate it, and I'm the same. I like challenges."

Given the internationalism that is at the heart of Cryptic's work, Boyd might have her biggest challenge to come following the UK's forthcoming departure from the European Union. Her response to it is defiant.

"I'm refusing to let Brexit change a thing," she says. "It's a huge mess, and we can hypothesise about what might happen as much we like, but we don't know, and you always have to be optimistic."

In terms of looking forward, Boyd plans to be around a while longer yet. "I've at least another 10 years in me," she says. "There are more challenges in more territories. Look at how things have changed. In the 80s it was all about Japan, then it was China. Now it's the Philippines and North Korea. The world is a very complicated place, but I hope Cryptic will be ravishing the senses a while yet."

Cryptic Nights presents Watchtower & Origins, CCA, Glasgow, March 7.