

The Herald

Out of the shadows, into the limelight

[NEIL COOPER](#)

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FRESH TALENT: Morna Pearson's debut professional play, *Distracted*, will tonight be awarded the prestigious Meyer-Whitworth prize for new writing

Tonight is a big night for playwright Morna Pearson. When the 27-year-old from Elgin steps up to receive a cheque for £10,000 from Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of the National Theatre on London's South Bank, she will not only be getting a cash boost allowing her more time to write; she will be confirmed as one of the freshest and most vibrant voices to come out of Scotland for years.

As The Herald can exclusively reveal, Pearson will be announced tonight as the winner of this year's prestigious Meyer-Whitworth award for new writing for her debut professional play, *Distracted*. Pearson's remarkable piece of grotesquery, set in a caravan park and involving two young boys, wowed audiences when it played as part of the *Cubed* season at the Traverse in Edinburgh in 2006.

Commissions are already ongoing for the Traverse, Paines Plough and BBC Radio Scotland, and further doors look set to open for Pearson. She's already followed up *Distracted* this year with the equally strange *Elf Analysis*, part of the lunchtime programme at Oran Mor in Glasgow.

It's unlikely, though, that glitzy awards ceremonies will turn Pearson's head from the very singular world her work occupies. It was quite a shock for her to find out that *Distracted* had even been shortlisted for the award - which, since 1991, has been a major barometer of new writing talent. Funded by the Royal National Theatre Foundation, it is open to writers who have had no more than two plays professionally produced; previous winners include Terry Johnson, Philip Ridley and Conor McPherson. Pearson isn't the first winner from Scotland: three other plays that premiered at the Traverse have also been acclaimed. In 1998, David Harrower's second play, *Kill the Old, Torture the Young*, won; and in 2001, victory was shared between Henry Adam's debut, *Among Unbroken Hearts*, and *Gagarin Way*, which marked the arrival of *Black Watch* writer Gregory Burke.

Pearson, then, is in pretty good company - even though, she says, she didn't actually know the Traverse had entered her play. "I'd seen it the award advertised, but then the deadline passed and I thought, oh well, maybe no-one thinks it's good enough."

As anyone who saw *Distracted* will know, it was more than good enough. Pearson is happy to admit, however, that she isn't sure where the idea for the play came from. "It started with a granny," she says, "and then aspects of the wee boy came from my brother, who used to be really into dinosaurs. Oh, and we lived in a caravan park when I was younger. I think I was only about three or four, but there's all these vivid images of that time that must have had a big impact on me.

"Also, my dad used to work with geriatrics in a hospital, and I used to go there and have all these slightly off-the-wall old ladies coming up to me and telling me things I didn't understand."

For all its raw vernacular observations, *Distracted* is far kookier than any piece of autobiography Pearson's comments might suggest. In tone it more resembles D B C Pierre's novel *Vernon God Little*.

Sitting in the Traverse bar on a break from her job as a library assistant at Edinburgh University, Pearson comes across as one of the most unassuming writers you're likely to meet. But beyond her initial shyness lies a fierce off-kilter imagination which, more than any other writer of her generation, isn't scared to leap away from boring old naturalism and into a magical realist world of her own design.

Pearson was attracted to drama from an early age, and by 17 knew that she wanted to write. But opportunities, she says, were limited in the north-east of Scotland. "And I never really identified with anything I studied, so I suppose I just wanted to use my imagination to create my own world".

Moving to Edinburgh, Pearson specialised in playwriting on Queen Margaret University's drama course. "In my first two years at uni, I wrote all these short 20-minute plays that weren't particularly good. I was trying to write sort of straight, normal plays - just trying to find my voice, I suppose."

After graduating, Pearson joined the Traverse Young Writers' Group, realising, she explains, that she "needed some sort of system above me to make sure I kept on writing". She says she was also shy of sending stuff out: "I wanted to see what the Traverse was like before I showed them anything I'd written at uni, which were plays about kids with disgusting examples of the adults in their lives."

It was at the Traverse that Pearson's special voice began to flourish. Her play *Untogether*, about a boy and a girl with "mad families", received a performed reading as part of the Royal Court Young Writers festival, and was produced in Sydney by the Australian Young People's Theatre.

Significantly, rather than naming any playwrights as influences, Pearson mentions comedy subversives such as Chris Morris and Steve Coogan. "Pretty crazy stuff," says the woman whose last play was about an office worker avoiding her sex-obsessed colleagues by seeking advice from an elf living in the stationery cupboard.

Discussing this perceived oddness in her work, she says: "Hopefully it isn't just for the sake of it, but is more about being entertaining. *Elf Analysis* was done really quickly,

and we didn't really have time to go into some of the more serious things. It was just a bit wild." And she laughs.

Pearson's eyes light up when she talks about her work - you can almost see her physically blossoming. If she wins any more awards, such confidence might well become permanent - because the Meyer-Whitworth isn't the first she's picked up. In 2006, as well as penning the internet-only drama JCN 16 for Raindog Productions, she won the inaugural Rod Hall Memorial Prize, founded in honour of the late literary agent.

The Meyer-Whitworth award, though, is a major breakthrough for Pearson. This year the award was administered for the first time by the Playwrights' Studio Scotland after the Arts Council of England withdrew its support. As well as Playwrights' Studio director Julie Ellen, judges included The Herald's own dance and performance critic, Mary Brennan.

Any accusations of local bias, though, are unfounded. After all, it was the award's third judge, Stuart Mullins, director of the English children's theatre company Theatre Is, who was initially bowled over by the power of Pearson's Doric-accented tour de force. So impressed was he by *Distracted* that he's already been in touch with a view to future work.

With Pearson currently juggling her time between three commissions, the library and a part-time book-keeping job, he may have to wait some time. For now, her confidence is growing but her feet remain firmly on the ground.

"I'm still emerging, I think, aren't I?" she asks nervously, unaware of just how much she's already arrived. "I don't think I'm quite there yet."

- www.nationaltheatre.org.uk
- www.traverse.co.uk
- www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk