



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

in association with Playwrights' Studio, Scotland and the Traverse Theatre

News Release

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Drama prize contenders not afraid to tackle difficult themes

Ambitious plays about our dependency on oil, the extremes of sectarianism and the day-to-day impact of military conflict have been shortlisted for one of the UK's most distinguished drama awards.

The nominations for the James Tait Black Prize for Drama – an accolade linked to Britain's oldest literary awards – were selected from more than 180 entries worldwide. They deal with complex issues in unique and often surprising ways. The shortlisted dramas are:

- *Oil* by Ella Hickson, produced by Almeida Theatre
- *Cyprus Avenue* by David Ireland, co-produced by the Abbey Theatre and Royal Court Theatre
- *Scenes from 68* Years* by Hannah Khalil, produced by Sandpit Arts and presented at Arcola Theatre

The £10,000 drama prize is presented by the University of Edinburgh in association with Playwrights' Studio, Scotland and the Traverse Theatre.

This year's winner will be announced at a ceremony on Monday, 21 August, in the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, where readings of each play will be performed by professional actors. The event is part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and tickets to attend can be booked online.

The prize was launched in 2012 when Britain's oldest literary awards, the James Tait Black Prizes, were extended to include a new category for drama.

Ella Hickson's *Oil* spans 150 years, and centres on a woman called May and her daughter. May travels through time – first as a 19th century farmer's wife with a newly invented kerosene lamp; then as a servant in 1908 Tehran; and, in 1970, as the CEO of an oil company. The play, which ends in a nightmarish post-oil future, links the oil-age to feminism.

Cyprus Avenue by David Ireland is a shocking black comedy about the dangers of deep-rooted prejudices. Eric is a Belfast Loyalist who becomes convinced that his five-week-old granddaughter is Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams. The play reveals Eric agonising over his sense of identity and masculinity.

Hannah Khalil has created a series of everyday snapshots from life in Palestine in *Scenes from 68* Years*, which spans from 1948 to the present day. The cast of six play a range of

Israeli and Arab characters, showing the human impact of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, where the war and home life are experienced side-by-side.

The drama prize is, uniquely, judged by emerging artists and established theatre experts, rather than critics. The accolade is awarded to the best new play in English, Scots or Gaelic, which demonstrates an original theatrical voice and makes a significant contribution to the art form.

Chair of the judging panel, Greg Walker, who is Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, said: "The James Tait Black Prize for Drama is not just about celebrating the best new play – it recognises originality in voice, and we are very proud of that. This year's shortlisted plays deal with fascinating subjects in ambitious and exciting new ways. Each year, we ask our student judges to nominate dramas that change their life a little, and I think this year's selection do just that."

The judging panel includes students and academics from the University of Edinburgh, representatives from the Traverse Theatre, Playwrights' Studio, Scotland and Schaubuhne Theatre in Berlin.

Orla O'Loughlin, Artistic Director at the Traverse Theatre said: "This year's shortlist represents the impressive breadth and depth of innovation that the James Tait Black Award seeks to champion. These three writers have created vibrant, urgent and provocative new plays which speak deeply to our turbulent times. I am delighted for them all and congratulate them on their great success."

Maja Zade, Dramaturg at Schaubuhne Theatre, said: "It was a real privilege to be part of the judging panel for the James Tait Black Prize and to be able read such a wide range of stimulating and experimental work. I am particularly excited about the three plays that made it onto the shortlist, three plays that tackle complex social and political issues with assurance and that manage to provide a startlingly original take on them."

Previous winners include: Gary Owen's one-woman monologue, *Iphigenia in Splott* (2016); Gordon Dahlquist's sci-fi play *Tomorrow Come Today*; Rory Mullarkey's *Cannibals* (2014) and Tim Price's acclaimed drama *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning* (2013).

Tickets for the James Tait Black Prize for Drama Award Ceremony can be booked online via the Traverse website: <https://www.traverse.co.uk/whats-on/event-detail/1228/james-tait-black-prize-for-drama-2017-the-award-ceremony.aspx>

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