

THEATRE

BY CRAIG McLEAN

Seize the play

Tam Dean Burn as television. What does the latest collaboration between Burn and Boilerhouse theatre company mean?

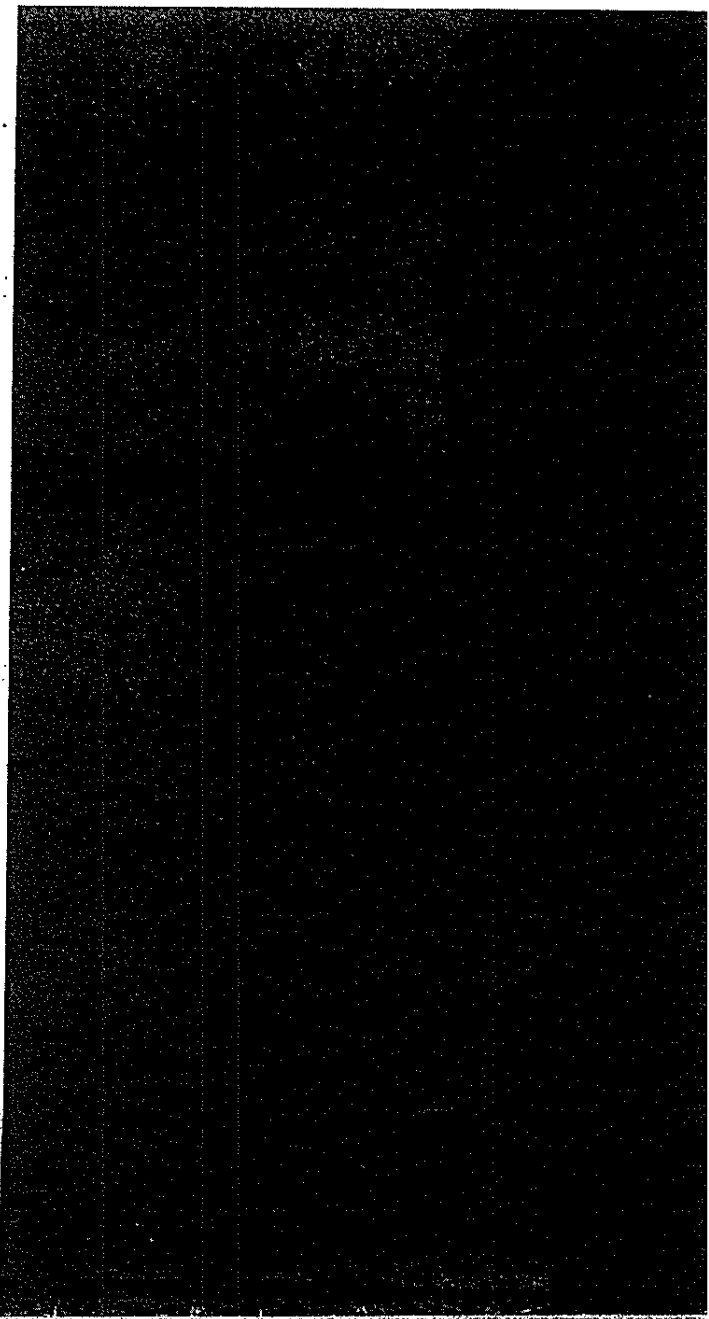
GUT covered in scars and riven with furrows where the blood is flooding out, Iggy Pop stands in an old lighthouse in London's Docklands. His ripply torso is undulating spasmodically, his voice caterwauling normally. He is singing a number from his later period, but his wired, witsy frame still carries all the power of its younger incarnation – the one that hauled itself out of the leafy Midwest sleep-

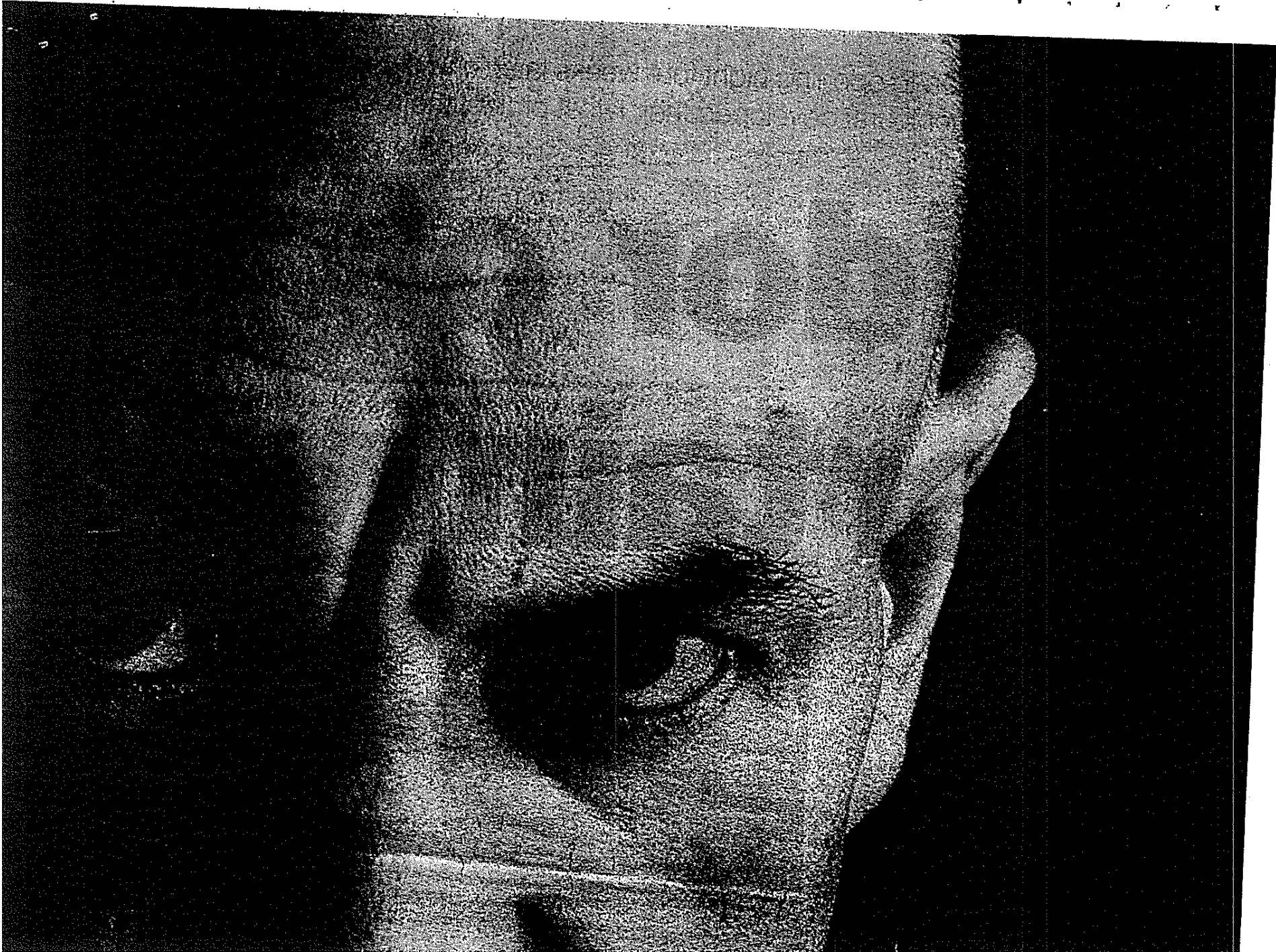
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 The Ig drops to his knees,
 leans at the dusty rafters, flips
 over on his head and rolls on the
 stage. Then he's off, running.

...
 their own. Bringing in the visuals and projectors and stuff has fired it up quite a bit as well. Basically we're finding ways to do that type of theatre, we're getting better and better at that.

"It's more like a dream than a 'play'. Or nightmare, what with things swirling about. You don't know what's going on. I like theatre like that!"

Burn is 39, from Edinburgh, and one of the most powerful forces in "alternative" Scottish theatre. He has played Black Bob in Hamish Macbeth, but his art lies elsewhere. Recently he has played Jerusalem and Tokyo with Steven Berkoff and his *Coriolanus*. His friendship with Irvine





He is followed by two bits of rattling mobile scaffolding equipped with small searchlights. The music kicks in to something else.

Today, tonight, Iggy Pop is being played – being karaoke'd – by Tam Dean Burn. This is a performance of *Headstate*, the free-form "play" devised by Boilerhouse theatre company and Irvine Welsh in 1994 in a series of open-house workshops. At one of those early work-outs, the loose narrative thread – a

butcher inherits his dad's shop, the last thing he needs as he has a dead druggy clubber on his hands, alongside a sometimes canine, perhaps cannibalistic, maybe necrophiliac "associate"; and he is HIV positive – gathered round the irrepressible force of Burn.

Three years on, the play's central thrust – in a capitalist system we are all produced with a price – is tighter, harder, and more viscerally focused on Burn. Now, after a successful run at last year's Festival, *Headstate* is in London. And, despite the future-imperfect landscape of the partly regenerated, partly scary, strangely awkward-to-get-to Docklands, *Headstate* has been luring enthusiastic crowds into an old shed where there are no seats and they have to constantly scurry out of the way of careering bits of scaffolding and thumping techno. Nice.

Later, outside an East End cafe, Tam Dean Burn will reflect: "When we got the two new actresses in for the show at the Festival last year [Denise Evans and Michelle Gomez], they were just finding their feet. Now they've made it more



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Welsh led him to collaborate with the author on the talking-book of *Trainspotting*, and he appears in one strand of the upcoming *Acid House* trilogy for TV. Even these, though, are relatively linear projects. Where Burn's skills kick most effectively are in "multi-media" explorations of the boundaries of theatre. Recently, he took a performance version of the phenomenally successful anthology of dance music-inspired writings, *Discò Biscuits*, into clubs across

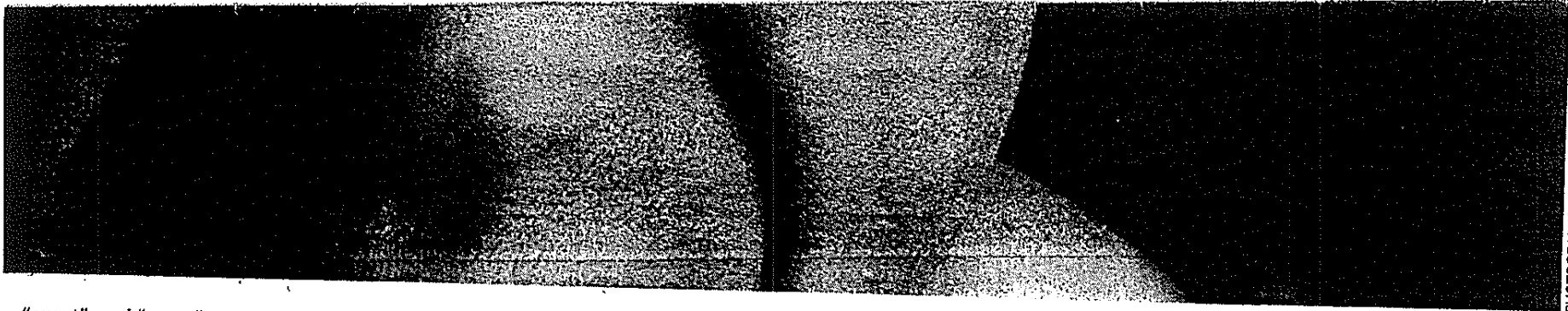
the country. Surprisingly, clubbers did stop dancing/snogging/drinking to watch someone doing a reading. Unsurprisingly, Burn made sure it was a full-on, full-frontal sensory assault, and not two-dimensional declaiming from a sheaf of paper. "I'm looking for a young audience that go to clubs, not theatre-types, and that's who's been coming to see *Headstate*. Which is fair enough. But theatre is beginning to move gradually – it seemed to be the last art-form that was being dragged kicking and screaming towards the future.

"Within theatre I don't know if they're looking for that kind of change – it's too much of a threat to the 'establishment'. But it's the same as everything, we'll just ignore them and get on with our own thing." Burn has always been so "laterally" inspired. After spending his twenties flitting between Edinburgh and London, Dundee and Glasgow, he came into acting full-time from the wreckage of the communist party. As Yeltsin was standing defiant on a tank outside Moscow's battered White House at the turn of the decade, and as the former eastern bloc countries were stut-

teringly embracing democracy, Burn and a group of Leninist die-hards were occupying the Party headquarters in London as the schisms in communism rattled around the world.

"I picked up on what the Leninists were doing at the end of the Miners' Strike," he says. "I thought, this is the actual one that I've been looking for, because I'd been looking through all the groups, trying to find the ideas that fitted with mine. And I got involved doing street theatre through that – doing Anti-Poll Tax stuff, sketches on Ireland. We were very much out there on the streets, doing it."

We can see Burn's actorly *force majeure* as a result both of this revolutionary political fervour, and of his early experiences in the Scottish punk scene of the late Seventies/early Eighties. Alongside his brother Russell (with whom he made the film *Brotherly Love*) and Davy Henderson (later of Win and now of The Nectarine No.9), Burn was a member of Year Zero Edinburgh bands the Dirty Reds and Fire Engines. Then, as now, "gig" meant "performance", "performance" meant



PHOTOGRAPHS: DAN TUFFS

"event", and "event" meant "art" of a sort. And vice versa.

Nearly 20 years on, music is still a primary source of influence. "I never really had a social life before, because of being so heavily involved with the politics," he concedes. As with his peer Welsh a couple of years previously, it was coming back to Edinburgh (in 1994, to work on *Headstate*) that opened his eyes to the possibilities offered by club- and drug-culture. Anyone who caught Burn's performance at the techno-influenced *Come On* at the 1995 festival, or the punk-play *Two Sevens Clash* at the Traverse the year before, will be aware of the under-explored dramatic potential in such pop-cultural motifs - and of Burn's adroitness at tapping this potential.

Now, with *Seizer*, all these strands come together. A collaboration between Boilerhouse, the cast of *Headstate* and writer Spencer Hazel, the play has Burn in the title role as some sort of "emperor of entertainment". That is, he is television - and television in an age of "real-life docu-dramas" and fly-on-the-wall extravaganzas and video footage of

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laser-guided smart-bombs disappearing down factory chimneys on desert plains.

"These shows are supposedly about real life, turning people's emotional traumas into entertainment. *Seizer's* about how that's affecting us. 'Cos you watch these things and it's hard to turn off, you do get caught up in them. So we're looking at how television is dominating our lives more and more with these kinds of programmes. But there's a performance element, too. What is real with us in this play? Is this me as an actor talking to the audience, or is this me as Tam?"

"Obviously, too, the title refers to the Roman amphitheatre. People would demand gorier and gorier spectacle. Now, after the Gulf War and live-operations-in-hospital dramas, is this that what we need?" Fittingly, given the subject matter and Burn's interests, *Seizer* draws from all angles in its quest for visceral reality. To be staged in the open-air quad in Edinburgh's Old College, *Seizer* is drawing on the expertise of the organisers of the annual neo-pagan Beltane Fire celebration on the city's Calton Hill, using "fire sculptures" and

In your face: revolutionary Edinburgh actor Tam Dean Burn is 'one of the most powerful forces in "alternative" Scottish acting'

thumping sound to make its message anything but medium.

"Plus," nods Burn, ever-enthusiastic and ever-invigorated, "Spencer doesn't write 'normal' characters or dialogue, but 'tracks'. And we're gonna be like DJs, trying to find different ways to put the tracks together. And I'm the agitator in there, the powerful figure who is always goading, turning things up to the light, exposing things. But I get my comeuppance in the end. I don't yet know how I do, mind you! Something about '*Seizer* scrambling about amongst the burnt effigies'! It'll be great!"

There is, as usual with Tam Dean Burn, more, too. "There's also American Caesar, Iggy's album! I want to get a bit of that in as well. Irvine said that he'll get the video of *Headstate* to him. That would be the best! Imagine - us doing a performance with Iggy! It'll come I think ..."

Well Iggy, surely, keeper of the punk flame, would understand.

● *Seizer*, the Quad, University Old College, South Bridge, August 9-25 (not 15, 16, 23)