

# Burns critic goes from bard to verse

The artist David Mach may be the unlikeliest of guests at a birthday bash for Scottish poet, Mike Wade reports

Ever since his childhood in 1960s Fife, David Mach has felt uncomfortable about Robert Burns: the poems, the palaver, all the national bard "crap".

It took several decades for his feelings to explode into the open and when they did, the artist found himself almost within touching distance of Alex Salmond, as the first minister at the time gave the address on Burns night in Ayr. It should have been an auspicious occasion. There was a crowd of 500 and Mach, a distinguished guest, was sitting at a table with the broadcaster Kirsty Wark, about five feet from Salmond as the politician got to his feet.

"Salmond started talking about Scotland, he mentioned Burns, shortbread and tartan," Mach recalls. "My stomach turned. I started to shout, then I thought, 'Holy shit, what happened there?' Kirsty Wark shoved her chair away from me, not to be associated."

The first minister carried on but the racket broke out again. "He said some other stupid thing," Mach recalls. "I shouted something else, to the point that he had to stop and address me."

Against this backdrop it seems implausible that Mach, 61, should this year celebrate Burns's birthday by reciting poetry of his own on stage but that is exactly what he is doing.

Mach is an artist who established his reputation with *Polaris*, a sculpture depicting a submarine made from 6,000 tyres, exhibited outside the Royal Festival Hall, London, in 1981. Since then, his works have been commissioned around the world.

In Scotland he is best known for the *Big Heids*, three giant heads on the southern flank of the M8, a celebration of Motherwell's steelmaking heritage. He's famous too for his matchstick sculptures and once made a bust of Burns only to set fire to it to mark the opening of a poetry festival in St Andrews.

Mach describes the latest, lyrical twist to his career as a kind of evolution. About ten years ago



David Mach, below, has made a gorilla from coathangers and a Burns head from matchsticks. He has now turned to writing

he formed a band and began writing songs. Though he had always been "down" on poets, music "can't help but have rhyme or metre" and his poems began to emerge.

He will perform some of them at Summerhall, Edinburgh, alongside Robert Crawford, a distinguished Burns scholar, and a poet in his own right. Even for Mach, a raucous, ebullient man, the pairing seems a daunting proposition. The two men have met already and when Crawford heard Mach recite, he told him: "That's not poetry, it's verse."

"He's a very serious, scholarly professor, and he put me right straightaway," Mach laughs. "Part of me thought, 'I better read up, I better get wiser before we

go on stage'. But another part of me doesn't want that. I want that naive thing, when you are ready to say anything. That's important to me. I am quite prepared to make an arse of myself."

Audience members should not arrive expecting a tidal wave of praise for the national poet, for the simple reason that Mach remains "very suspicious" of Burns. "He's not a hero of mine," he says. "I'm very suspicious of anything socialist." In this respect Mach accepts that his own upbringing was "odd". Joe, his father, was a Polish migrant who spent ten years in a Siberian labour camp after unwittingly stepping the wrong side of the Poland-Russia border. When he finally escaped to Methil, his bitter memories of hard labour arrived with him.

"Anything tinged with red was immediately questioned in our house," Mach said. "My dad was an out-and-out Tory, even though he was a miner, in Scotland, in the middle of a hotbed of socialism. He brought me up to be

suspicious of everything." These days, not surprisingly, the artist is as out-of-step politically with his artsy London friends as he is with old acquaintances from the Fife coalfield. "The proclamation of socialist tendencies by everyone around me always makes the milk in my f\*\*\*ing tea curdle," he says. "And I hate all that SNP bullshit."

"That's an odd thing for a Scot. People expect me to be leftwing. I'm not. I'm not rightwing either. People want you to declare one way or another. I don't feel like that."

One constant in his life was Lesley, his wife. They met at Buckhaven High School and had been married for 35 years when she died three years ago. She was deeply involved in his work,



## Q&A

**After decades in England, do you feel English or Scottish?**  
Please. I'm Scottish, that's ridiculous.

**What's your favourite place?**  
I love being in Scotland, but I love being in any number of places. Kent: great place. Half an hour from the studio. It looks like 1948; I half expect a Spitfire to fly low over the hedge.

**Favourite piece of music?**  
I like a lot of Jeff Beck. *Blackbird*, that's a brilliant track.

**Which artist has most influenced you?**  
Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

**Favourite poet?**  
I haven't got one.

**What book is by your bed?**  
*Blue Dog* by Louis de Bernières.

**What do you think of the Turner Prize?**  
It's a bit of a freak show now, isn't it?

organising the teams of artists involved in some of the projects, arranging shows, supervising visits and helping to put the finishing touches to sculptures.

In about 2010 she was diagnosed with a brain tumour and had 18 operations over five years before finally succumbing to pneumonia. For much of the time she was cared for at a Kirkcaldy nursing home. Her ashes were scattered on the beach at Lower Largo, her home town, where Mach now has a cottage. Those dark days served to reconnect Mach with his childhood home. He spends more time north of the border now and has a girlfriend in Scotland.

This reconnection can only benefit his stage show, he reckons. "I had forgotten how useful it was to have grown up in place where if you say two words with the wrong intonation, you can get in trouble," Mach says. "It could even be a greeting: 'Y'all right?' 'What the f\*\*\* is it to you?' Fife is fantastic for that."

"You can't just say something and get away with it. There is an earthy take on things, even from your own mother. I like that."

David Mach, Summerhall, January 27, noon. Part of the Burns Unbroke festival