

# AIRC/HIVE

**A site-specific theatre project for libraries**

**By Brian Thunder**

In the Café of the National Library of Scotland the curator of the Gaelic Collection sits waiting to meet with his teenage son. The father speaks to his son in Gaelic. The son, though he has been brought up with Gaelic all his life, refuses to speak it and responds in English.

FATHER: Nuair a tha mi a 'bruidhinn ann an Gàidhlig, ann an poblach, Tha mi a' dèanamh a 'chànain ri fhaicinn. Tha mi a' faireachdainn nas lugha neo-fhaicsinneach.  
(When I speak Gàidhlig in public I'm making the language visible. I feel less invisible.

SON: Dad it's great that you feel less invisible when you speak Gàidhlig, but for me it's embarrassing.

FATHER: Car son?

(Why?)

SON: Because nobody ever knows that it is Gàidhlig. They look at us and think we are foreigners, that we don't belong here.

The parent and child have a relationship that is based on telling each other stories. They both use storytelling to explain the world to each other and to make sense of it themselves. The Father attempts to explain to his son why he chooses to continue to speak Gaelic in a society that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile. These two characters tell each other stories which express the experiences of being a minority speaker in a Scottish, European and global context. The father uses objects from the Library's Gaelic collection (books, maps and sound) to show his son the way that

knowledge is intimately connected with language and that without that language we have a poorer understanding of the world.

*Airc/Hive* focuses on the experiences of minority language speakers in a world dominated by majority languages. It explores the reasons why the rate of loss of biodiversity and linguistic diversity are identical and how they may be linked.

The son is indifferent to his father's concerns with language and pre-occupied with what he sees as the more immediate and important issue of the ecological destruction of the world. The father tries to make the son understand that the two are not separate and constructs for him a magical story set in the future.

FATHER: Smaoineachadh air seo, aig àm choreigin, san àm ri teachd chan eil ach dusan cànanan a tha a bhith air fhàgail. Chan e dìreach cànan a bhiodh air chall.

(Think about it, at some point in the future all that is left are a dozen languages. It would not just be language that is lost)

SON: I don't think your right. If only a dozen languages remained it would be easier for us to understand each other. All the knowledge in the world is not going to disappear or else what is the point of your library?

He imagines a point in the future where, if the current rate of loss of language is not halted, our current 7,000 world languages have been reduced to around 50 and an equally devastating loss of species has left the world devoid of bees. This story comes alive in front of the father and son, played out by two characters; a woman, engaged in research in a library, trying to make things grow in a world without bees and a young man who seems to be living in the library. The young man can only speak Gaelic, the young woman only English. Unlocking the language reveals the young man's secret. He is actually very old and is the keeper of the last beehive, installed deep in the library's stacks. He has been kept alive by the royal jelly produced by his bees.

As he reveals the story to his son, the father also reveals that he has a terminal illness.

His language will die with him. At the same time he concludes the story of the Botanist and the Beekeeper at the moment where the bees have enabled the few plants the Botanist has smuggled into the library to reproduce and she has given birth to the Beekeeper's child.

The father leaves it to the son to conclude which language this child in the story might speak.

MAN: A' rud beag biodach seo a tha air a chumail beò dhomh. Tha e coltach beag ach ann an da-rìribh, tha e gle mòr

(This small thing has kept me alive. It seems small but in truth it is huge.)

WOMAN: I'm sorry I don't understand.

Airc/Hive: if a language dies, do we realize how much we lose?