

It Isn't Fixed

On Sunday December 7th 2008, in association with Graeae and the Arcola, writernet hosted *It Isn't Fixed*, a day of visioning; of ideas and discourse around playwrights and playwriting: of future challenges and possibilities.

writernet is winding up after 10 years, with another 13 years backstory before that as New Playwrights Trust. We wanted to bring playwrights together for a day to inspire, affect and challenge current thinking and practice as a spur to better quality work generated in a broader set of contexts.

The day included artists in conversation; provocations; Open Space and a party.

We invited a number of playwrights to speak.

Invitees and speakers included:

Gabriel Gbadamosi, Bonnie Greer, Roy Williams, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Dipo Agboluaje, Kaite O'Reilly, Jenny Sealey, Alex Bulmer, Mike Kenney, Roney Fraser Munro, Mehmet Ergun, Fin Kennedy, Peter Arnott, Simon Stephens, Sara Clifford, Peter Rumney, Richard Shannon, Christopher Hampton, David Eldridge, Steve Waters, Paul Sirett.

This blog is a virtual space for *It Isn't Fixed*. It contains documentation and reflection on the day. Please add your comments, thoughts and provocations.

It Isn't Fixed - Structure of the Day

If we believe that playwriting is valuable, how in this changing landscape can playwrights thrive and have a voice? What is the nature of this ritual, this get together today?

Its about inspiring people to think and act collectively

Its not about individual careers, but the many voices that construct a theatre worth any attention

What is the new shape?

.....Lets explain the structure of the day allow its symbolism to unfold

a) We begin with 5 conversations between artists, so we can benefit from their thinking, speaking and listening

1. The commissioning model is now so dominant – what does this mean for playwrights, their creativity and how the theatre as a sector is thinking about risk?

2. 10 years of collaboration; is Graeae's evolution around playwriting a new paradigm for us all?

3. If you stay in this game for 20-25 years you can get some really interesting writing, but its seldom a straight line.

4. Creative Partnerships as was, will now be the Arts Council's largest single client, eclipsing the Opera House, National, RSC and the orchestras. But is it art?

5. White clouds await painting, before we round off the morning with writernet disappearing – but through the skylight.....Think of the Phoenix...

b) After a good Turkish lunch will move into an Open Space session

This represents a self-organising process; participants construct the agenda and schedule during the meeting itself.

It will be an opportunity to present your questions, your issues, your provocations - and then decide on the further conversations you want to be involved in. Chrissie Tiller, who is facilitating will explain more how it works immediately after lunch.

c) We will conclude with a performative plenary

a performance with no formal beginning and no formal conclusion.

There will be a table and 12 chairs on stage. At any point anyone can sit at the table and assuming there is someone to talk to at the table a discussion could begin: ask a question..

anyone can join the table at any point and leave at any point. Those at the table are the performers. Talk is the only course. There is no host or hostess. To participate take a seat at the table. If the table is full you can request a seat.

d) Finally we will have a party to celebrate writernet and its achievements

It Isn't Fixed: Opening Address

On maps and fractals

Anyone looking at the writernet home page for the last couple of years will have noticed a map of the UK

Geometry and play are woven together in Benoit Mandelbrot's Fractal Geometry of Nature, now just over 25 years old.

Benoit Mandelbrot compares the length of the border between Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese atlas shows the border 20% longer than the Spanish atlas. Should Spain break off diplomatic relations with Portugal? No, The Spanish surveyors based their instruments on a larger unit of distance than the Portuguese, and therefore measured fewer squiggles on the line defining the border....

Something very interesting and wonderful happened when Mandelbrot was measuring the coastline of Britain. He was not observing nature but devising ways to use mathematics to generate things "like" nature.

To analyse the coastline of Britain (or the border between Spain and Portugal) mathematically, Mandelbrot creates a fractal line that behaves like a coastline. In other words he makes a mathematical model.

The word fractal is derived from the Latin frangere to break, to create irregular fragments...

The writernet map of the UK correlates to the division into regions and nations promulgated by the Arts Council, but it comes with a caveat drawn from analysis of the opening image of the movie Casablanca.

....A Hollywood mogul famously decreed that a movie should always open with a map.

In the map at the beginning of the film Casablanca, the map shows what is supposedly Casablanca. However, Casablanca is not that far north. The city actually shown is more like Tangier, as Casablanca, while a coastal city, is actually farther south.

Nature , as far as Mandelbrot can represent it, is radically elusive and probably monstrous and without doubt terrifying to any right-minded disciple of Euclid....

Much has been made over the past 12 months in McMaster's Review, and James Purnell's pronouncement during the 5 minutes he was Culture Minister, of the need to replace a culture of measurement with one of excellence.

Instead of pitting measurement against excellence I want to turn to Edward Bond's key note speech which he gave a few years back at a symposium on Young People's Theatre

On instrumental knowledge and imagination

Edward Bond says

"Drama tends to be put aside as entertainment or something extra and it's never regarded as a fundamental. Up until a few hundred years ago, drama was the foundation of all education, and indeed of all culture, either in the form of stories, plays or religion, which is a form of drama. It's only quite recently, since really the 18th century perhaps, that other forms of knowledge have become predominant. We live in two great spheres of knowledge: one is instrumental knowledge, and the other is creativity.....But it's a very different form of knowledge, and a society, which is mainly based on instrumental knowledge, finds it difficult to cope with this other form of knowledge.

The image I want to give you is a bit more practical. It goes absolutely to the root of theatre, because the human mind is a theatrical structure and if it were not, we could not be human. A child is sitting in its high chair, and it has this little table in front of it, and there is on the edge of its table an object, and the child reaches for the object. Now we know that animals can do that. Primates, for instance, can put sticks together in order to reach bananas and all this sort of thing. The reason I use this image is because I want to argue against reduction, because drama is drama. It cannot be reduced to its biological antecedents in any way, and that's very important. We are dealing with a specific subject. The child reaches for the object. Is it doing what an animal would do when it reaches for the object? No, it is not doing that, because the child will get the object, as an animal will, but also it will create a concept. It will create the concept of the gap between it and the object. That is unique. No animal has a concept of nothingness, of the gap. Once that concept is there, you are into the whole of human history. You're into something entirely different. You're into something which must be dramatised. You're into imagination.

Imagination is a dangerous word, and we ought to try and define it. If we don't define it and if we don't understand how it works, then it becomes a trap for us, or it becomes a word too easy to use. Children are told 'you've got too much imagination' and the next day the child will be told 'you have no imagination'. It's a word we just use without really bothering to define it. If we could define it, it would become of great practical use to us.

So what is imagination? Well, imagination has been evolved, and evolution doesn't involve anything if it doesn't have a need for it. It appears to be exactly the opposite of reason, because reason tells me I'm in this world. Imagination seems to be able to create something called fantasy. That seems odd. It's as if, you know, one foot pointed one way, the other foot pointed the other, and evolution doesn't make mistakes. What is that about? Or if it does make mistakes, it wipes the mistake out very quickly. One has to say it is because of imagination that we enter history. We move from evolution to history. Imagination is absolutely necessary to anything that is self-conscious. You cannot have self-consciousness without imagination. The idea is ungraspable. This says something important, because if we are the self-conscious species, the species capable of making concepts and interrogating concepts,

then imagination is vital to us. We are human not because we reason but because we have imagination, and because of that we become self-conscious....

.....But the huge problem you face is that if we live in an unjust society, cannot deal with the pathology of imagination which is the source of our humanness, then you start inventing instrumental solutions. That is precisely what Himmler meant when he said 'I gassed the Jews out of love'. He had an instrumental solution to a problem of imagination....

.... There is no ethical text that has not been corrupted by its strongest adherents, no vestment of virtue that has not been soiled by its wearer with blood or mud – nor could there be. Drama wants to give you the question 'why?' and make you responsible for answering it. Oedipus is wise and the Sphinx says to Oedipus – you know the riddle: what goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs at dusk? – and Oedipus says 'the human being'. And then there is a play, and the play is very strange because it produces that being which goes on five legs. Oedipus, when he finally knows who he is, goes on five legs – his own, Antigone's and his stick. The wise sphinx gets it wrong, and only drama can create the truth...."

Thank you, have a fabulous day.

writernet - Disappearing Through The Skylight

When writernet was founded as New Playwrights Trust over 20 years ago its purpose was to address an enormous gap in the landscape for new or emerging playwrights

At that time very little existed

New Playwrights Trust alongside the regional organisations Northern Playwrights and North West Playwrights led the way in open-access, grass roots playwright development. These were later followed by Yorkshire Playwrights and Stagecoach. These organisations pioneered the interconnection of specific strands of development, enabled discourse and advocated for resources or new writing, especially for emerging playwrights.

Having enjoyed a brief period of regular investment in the mid-90s, NPT lost revenue funding in 1997 when London Arts Board decided – at the rump end of 17 years of disinvestment from the Tory government – that the organisation was no longer a strategic priority.

This led to a new era in the organisation's work and a new name – writernet, in 1999, suggesting the support of a net. the interconnectedness of a network, and acknowledging the advent of the internet.

Mik Flood On networks

"The most valued and most essential benefits of networking are intangible. Even the material benefits arise from the intangibles gained. The knowledge, skills, confidence, territorial reinforcement, opportunities are recognised as the 'true driving force of the economy', precious since it is acquired over time.

. The communication in the network is horizontal and not vertical. This unguided free space poses, for some, a question of democracy or control.....the contradiction between fears of central interference or hierarchy in the network, and the necessity of crucial organisational work necessary to maintain a high level of interaction in the network. To consciously control evolution and interfere with it represent at one and the same time a fear and a desire.

Existing tools for evaluation and analysis are not relevant for cultural networks, and might even be dangerously misleading. The true economy of the networks is not financial, but is the framework which networks create for intercultural exchange, artistic creativity, independent confrontation and collaborative partnerships within the European space and beyond".

...writernet began to open up its work, exploring new areas of concern, developing it's networks, and leading the way on professional development for dramatic writers. Increasingly writernet worked with other bodies to achieve it's objectives, for example for over ten years with the theatre committee of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, as a founder member of literaturetraining and by developing and expanding

the Playwrights Network of playwright development organisations across the regions and nations of the UK.

Writernet sought to fill the gaps, pioneer new thinking and create the space for possibility, focusing projects, services and networks around 4 areas

- Professional Development;
- Diversity;
- Third Sector;
- International Work.

writernet operated continuously as an organisation for ten years with no regular funding. As our organisational development consultant found, this is simply not a sustainable model especially with the cuts to the sector following the lottery cash grab for the Olympics.

The proliferation of courses, workshops, support organisations and professional development opportunities has fuelled a huge increase in the supply of labour. The market now trades on the cachet of discovery – to the detriment of a robust repertoire of excellent contemporary work which can have a further life. Little attention has been paid to the demand side, either in terms of audiences, or third sector possibilities (playwrights working in education, community, healthcare, regeneration, criminal justice, business) where supply can actually generate demand rather than just meet it.

On the other hand writernet's unique overview of provision across the UK indicates that access is still not uniformly available. For example many disabled writers, and many of those based in the south-west or Wales do not have the same opportunities as others.

Rather than continuing to offer an open access service which simply continues to randomly fuel this supply, the challenge now will be how to create opportunities not just to make work but to generate the making of work....and its reception. This might take some reimagining.

I'd like to finish with the book from which I've drawn the title – *Disappearing Through The Skylight* in which polymath O.B.Hardison Jr

reviews the disappearance of fundamental verities in several of the major areas of modern culture: science, history, language, art....

He says:

"Consideration of intelligent machines suggests that the idea of humanity is changing so rapidly that it, too, can legitimately and without any exaggeration be said to be disappearing... Perhaps the disappearance will only be a change in the meaning of words This was apparently what Turing was thinking of when he predicted that by the end of the C20th "the use of words and general educated opinion" would have altered so much that the idea of machine intelligence would be generally accepted. Perhaps however Hans Moravec is right, and man is in the process of disappearing into the machines he has created.

Silicon devises are very new and there is no reason to believe, at least for the moment that their evolution is about to reach a dead end. Many of the intellectual abilities of carbon man have already been modelled in them, and a great deal that is important in the spirit of carbon man – his soaring imagination, his brilliance, his creativity, his capacity for vision – will probably be modelled in silicon before very long....

This sounds less like a death than a birth of humanity. Perhaps it is the triumph of the noosphere. Perhaps however it is the moment at which the spirit finally separates itself from an outmoded vehicle. Perhaps it is a moment that realises the age old dream of the mystics of rising beyond the prison of the flesh to behold light so brilliant it is a kind of darkness. William Butler Yeats wrote in his great prophetic poem "Sailing to Byzantium"

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.
Once out of Nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian Goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come

What will these shining constructs of silicon and gold and arsenic and germanium look like as they sail the spaces between worlds?

They will be invisible, but we can try to imagine them, even as fish might try to imagine the fishermen on the other side of the mirror that is the water's surface"

Thank you.

Jonathan Meth

5 conversations

1. David Eldridge and Oladipo Agboluaje – Is Theatre Commissioning Too Many Plays?

The two playwrights had a lively conversation by posing questions to each other on the above topic. The following are the main points they raised:

David Eldridge explained how playwright Robert Holman had had several plays commissioned by the Royal Court, but not produced by that theatre. He felt that producers were determining the limits of the playwrights' imagination. He felt that the 40 writers under commission at the Court was excessive and suggested sometimes it might be better for writers to turn down commissions (though he acknowledged the privileged position he had found himself in). Applauding Josie Rourke's restructuring of the literary management model at the Bush, Eldridge thought it was time more theatres experimented in this way.

Oladipo Agboluaje outlined his experience of how most writing comes from initiatives generated by theatres rather than from writers. This causes a tick-box mentality, producers deciding what is good, and writers writing to please them.

The audience were dismayed to hear his description of a theatre accepting unsolicited scripts in order to fulfil funding imperatives but not reading them.

Contributions from the audience raised the question of the writer's power, one delegate suggesting that the writer was also at the mercy of the decisions of directors as well as producers until they had established a reputation.

Another audience member suggested that theatres are monocultural institutions and that they are under pressure to achieve a marketable identity.

Lisa Goldman, AD of the Soho Theatre, answered some of the above charges by saying that the development of writers could be seen as a service to the industry even if not all of them were produced. She acknowledged that it might be time to change the literary management model, and expressed a desire for totally original ways of writing.

2. Alex Bulmer, Jenny Sealey and Paul Sirett – In Bed With writernet

This session was a good-humoured joint effort in which all speakers were more than happy to give way to other contributors!

Jenny Sealey talked about Graeae and the role of Writernet in supporting the development of its work with new writing. She outlined some of the issues concerning new work by and for disabled performers, including whether disability should form the content of the work and how this affects casting and future productions; the challenge of finding an audio-descriptive narrative for the texts; and the reluctance of some artists to have the 'disability tag' attached to their work.

The conference was informed about projects such as disPlay 4 and the Disabled Writers' Mentoring Scheme that have helped to support disabled writers. Alex Bulmer explained how 'Play labs' gave disabled writers a chance to develop their processes, and explained how the nature of many disabilities had a functional impact on the nature of their work that made it unique. Most importantly, the Graeae aesthetic was concerned with privileging the communication needs of the audience.

Discussion centred around how disabled theatre's determination to put issues of audience access foremost had caused it to challenge the traditional norms of traditional text-based theatre and find genuinely new ways of providing contact between actors and audience. Disabled work, it was felt, was therefore at the avant garde of contemporary theatre.

3. Peter Arnott and Richard Shannon – Thriving OR Surviving – Let Terror Be Your Guide

This was a highly amusing and lively session about how the two writers speaking had managed to survive and succeed as writers.

Both writers explained how it sometimes felt that writers had to choose between writing from the imagination and writing for money. They stressed that flexibility was needed, and the willingness to take risks. In any case, jobs for money could provide grist for the imaginative mill, lead to other, more interesting jobs, or even accidentally perhaps, result in worthwhile and creative writing.

Richard Shannon explained how he had been able to fund creative and worthwhile projects by using money he had made by corporate work. He had also been able to resurrect projects once he was in a position to do so – he stressed that keeping one's ear to the ground was very useful for attracting the interest of theatres, and that 'persistence and stickability' were vital traits for a writer.

Peter Arnott explained the importance of appealing to the audience's 'arse' as well as their 'head', and that a playwright's arse should ideally speak to those of the audience. Describing a writer as 'an actor with a pen' he stressed the energy required both to hold audiences' attention and to sustain a career.

The speakers and audience concurred that a writer had to be individually responsible for his or her own career.

4. Peter Rumney and Sara Clifford, But is it Art?

This session discussed young people's involvement in theatre and attitudes towards it.

Peter Rumney claimed that young people had been deprived of a voice, and that they are gravely exploited by a commercialised culture. He felt that he had a responsibility to young people to listen to their stories and give them the opportunities and skills to tell them. He also felt that as an individual he had things he wanted to say. He said that the stories he and young people told could be validated, challenged and changed by the audience.

Sara Clifford stated that the 'compartmentalisation' of young people's theatre in some senses disqualified it as art. She too felt that her job was to help people to find ways to articulate their stories, and, in addition to her work with young people, had worked on this with the terminally ill.

The speakers discussed the ethical issues raised by this role of the writer, and the fine line between enabling voices and the appropriation of others' material.

Delegates in the audience raised the issue of the quality of writing for children and urged writers to accept the money to make their art when it is available regardless of attitudes that would sideline it.

5. Kate O'Reilly and Gabriel Gbadamosi – Groups of White Clouds Waiting to be Painted

The session discussed issues concerning accessing work and the different points of view that could be used to approach art.

Gabriel Gbadamosi related a visit to an art gallery where the exhibits could only be understood within that context. He explained that his work on the Chorus rather than on the Heroes of Greek drama had led to a change in perspective in the whole work. He raised the issue of 'labels', and how it is easily assumed that such work is excessively

worthy. Theatre, he claimed, does not want to be labeled, but to 'escape'.

Kate O'Reilly explained that theatre could show us the different and diverse possibilities of what it is to be human. From her perspective, the atypical is typical, and this must be expressed through form rather than content. Cutting edge practice, she claimed, could be found with the unnormalised. Alternative dramaturgies could be achieved through the vantage point of the atypical. Sometimes, a Trojan Horse was necessary for a mainstream audience, placing radical dramaturgies within the expectations of a mainstream audience.

Audience debate raised the danger of excluding elements of the audience, particularly its 'normal' members, by coming from the renegade position. This was answered by the idea that narrative is shared collectively and the idea of the audience as dramaturg.

A view was expressed that the anger of excluded artists and their struggles can be a useful motivation to create art. O'Reilly claimed that this anger must be used to innovate. Another delegate complained that theatre was dominated by institutionalised norms that privileged bigger companies such as the RSC.

Open Space 1 - Do We Want Any More Stories?

Convenor – Jackie Bolton

NB. The following is drawn from notes I took during the group discussion. I was not, unfortunately, able to capture who said what; I have simply tried to document the thoughts and comments prompted by the question. I apologise in advance for any misrepresentations of opinion that may occur.

The above question was prompted by what seems to me a fascination with the 'individual voice' in British theatre. This fascination has led both playwrights and those who facilitate playwriting to focus on the 'unique perspective' or 'personal story' of the playwright over other considerations such as theatrical form or audience reception. In the cultivation of new plays and new playwrights, the mantra has been 'write what you know'. Whilst acknowledging the importance of

representing diverse voices and experiences on British stages, I wonder firstly whether the theatre industry has not exploited the 'stories' of individual playwrights, and secondly whether the play-based dramaturgies through which these stories are conventionally told delimit or neglect the communicative potential of theatre. How might considerations of form, in tandem with considerations of content, both broaden the potential range of communicated meaning and challenge audiences' critical engagement with the events/encounters so depicted?

The idea of the 'Trojan Horse' arose first: engaging an audience with a 'good story' as a means of smuggling in potentially subversive ideas/politics etc.

Inevitably, the question of what exactly was meant by 'story' or 'story-telling' was asked. It was suggested that what is at issue here are forms of story-telling which insist on telling one story in one way, forms which leave little room for interpretation or critical intervention by the audience. Rather than dictating a story to an audience, perhaps there are ways of telling stories that are multiple – not simply multiple narratives onstage but multiple ways of interpreting/engaging/piecing narrative strands together.

Again the idea of subversion arose: that it was possible to manipulate the standard dramaturgical structures of story-telling – plot, character, action etc. - unconsciously expected by audiences in order to subvert expected meanings.

It was pointed out that the cultural expectations always already appended to conventional structures of story-telling – the protagonist, the conflict, the resolution etc. – were oppressive when it came to telling stories which involved disabled persons or which aimed to express experiences from disabled perspectives. The cultural baggage that audiences tend to attach to disabled characters makes it difficult to write a protagonist, for example, that might be considered anything but 'plucky'.

It was pointed out that 'stories' do not necessarily have to conform to the Hollywood 'script guru' Robert McKee's formulaic structures of story-telling.

Is was queried whether the question really was 'Do we want any more stories?' or perhaps rather 'Are there means other than story-telling by which I might sucker an audience to watch my show'?

The emphasis in theatre-making is on engaging an audience's attention – stimulating an emotional interest in or response to the events onstage even if they weren't told as a linear story.

It was suggested that watching a play is really just a matter of following a thought – of finding this particular character's (playwright's?) head an interesting place to be in for a couple of hours.

No matter how sophisticated the narrative strategies are, or how random sequences, images or events might appear to be, we cannot stop the audience from piecing together some sort of coherent narrative – the impulse is hardwired into our brains. Perhaps we don't need complete stories – but the audience will always function as a detective.

An argument may be a plot – all about drawing two thoughts together.

Should we trust the audience to piece together their own story?

Theatre is a collective experience, not an individual personalised one: as a member of an audience your responses will be influenced or channelled through the responses of others.

Are we at a moment of cultural change vis-à-vis the ways in which 'story' might be understood, constructed and received? The 'narrative of Empire' has declined – we don't believe in over-arching stories of 'man', 'progress', 'enlightenment' any more (the demise of grand narratives – Lyotard and Jameson).

The presidential elections: who is in control of the political narrative? The representation of candidates, of the election, of the various campaigns is a highly political issue: who is controlling this narrative? The means by which political ascension is made seemingly natural, inevitable by conscious and skilful manipulation of dramaturgical mechanisms evidences precisely the critical nature of this discussion.

The dramaturgical structures, or 'forms' of theatre-making and playwriting are not neutral, transparent, amoral, apolitical. Strategies of representation – of which the natural realist play-based forms taken for granted in this country are part - are inherently political as key means by which we make sense of social, political, economic, psychological, sexual etc. realities.

Perhaps what we are after are not theatrical forms which are resistant to story-telling but forms which are aware of complexity of story-telling.

With regards the New Writing explosion of the past couple of decades: the focus upon 'individual voice' has been both symptom and cause of a 'manufactured authenticity' (after Noam Chomsky's 'manufactured consent') colluding with an un-thought-through plan (Arts Council?) to generate new plays and new playwrights. (New Writing proved good for business). The 'burden of representation' has been placed upon a few individuals whose experiences have been claimed as 'authentic' by theatres seeking to discover (and market) 'new' voices. Just because no-one has ever heard a particular story onstage before, it doesn't make the telling of that story or the representation of that experience 'authentic'.

The past few years have witnessed a decline in plays written in conscious response to previous plays, productions, playwrights or theatres. In place of such 'secondary criticism', the 'here and now' of contemporary society has dominated, with 'the youth' regarded as the most direct means of accessing the desires, hopes and issues of contemporary audiences.

What we might want is a theatre culture in which the issue of 'individual voice' (of 'originality' of 'vitality', of direct, unmediated access to experience) is permanently problematized. You can only be 'authentic' once! After that you're simply a playwright!

Novelty in playwriting is inherently conservative: by simply injecting the system with 'novelty' (e.g. 'new', 'unheard of' voices), the system itself remains the same.

The reception of the play: how does the environment in which a production is mounted impact upon the ways in which the work (or story) is received? How many levels of mediation are there and how do they affect the work?

British theatre seems to value direct, spontaneous responses to productions: don't like the idea of wading through secondary material in order to ascertain how a particular production has been interpreted/realised by a creative team: don't like to be told what to think but to simply experience it for oneself.

British theatre does not have to think about or concern itself with 'versions' of productions as in other countries (on the continent, for example): speaking English, we don't have to deal with translations (adaptations, versions) of play-texts to the same extent or in the same manner as other theatre cultures.

Perhaps playwriting should experiment less with 'telling' audiences a story than 'inviting' stories from audiences (trusting them to organise their own narrative journey).

By way of contrast, circus companies are increasingly inviting directors to work with their performers in order to 'build in' a story to their spectacles, to ground their performances in a narrative arc.

Jacqueline Bolton
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Open Space 2 - Where do writers write from?

The question put by NINA RAPI, was:

Where do writers write from and is there such a thing as should write from?

What follows is a montage of different views expressed in the session, compiled by N.R.

- There is a danger in the UK of writers losing their imagination and artistic freedom, expected to write to order, to abide by certain safe and familiar scenarios and forms, to satisfy 'bums on seats' demands primarily.
 - Balance needs to be drawn between 'bums on seats' and experimentation.
 - The curse of British theatre is social naturalism and kitchen sink. No daring.
 - A certain rawness of voice and experimentation is missing.
 - Too much emphasis is placed on confessional plays, set in living rooms. It's important to encourage writers to write outside this box and outside their experience, to create 'effervescent' plays, more self-consciously theatrical.
 - Historically, writers were sent out to factories to write about those experiences and 'studied reflection' was encouraged. It was wonderful. (We established in good humour that this must have been in the USSR and possibly in China too, soon after their respective revolutions i.e. socialist realism at its extreme, not necessarily something to aspire to.)
 - Verbatim theatre falsely sets itself up as 'objective' when it can't be. It is much better to acknowledge your subjectivity than pretend it's not there!
 - There is too much navel-gazing going on. No reflection on FORM or on how the work is received by the world. Too much emphasis on 'you' and 'heart'.
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- People are encouraged: 'be yourself'. What self is that exactly?
 - Identity politics can guarantee an audience for the writers, especially in audience-led theatres. However this is not necessarily a good thing as audience expectations of a homogeneous identity can produce predictable work, limiting the writer's imagination and artistic freedom. Also, it boxes the writers in as theatres expect them to only write from within that experience.
 - The dangers of being the 'flavour of the month' were highlighted. How who gets produced is determined by what is in fashion, rather than quality of work or sustaining the development of writers.
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- Writers spoke of being driven to explore other ways of presenting plays, e.g. multimedia in clubs.
 - Artists have historically created collectives for supporting each other and their ideas. Can writers create collectives to support each other,

discuss ideas and organize possible seasons or are writers too ego-driven to do that? Apparently, such initiatives do exist in places like Holland where writers and artists have taken over disused warehouses to organize seasons of new work. Must be: - open – share 'vision – be worth seeing – take into account 'accessing' the work, how you find out it's on, if it's NEW, i.e. marketing

- Question arose: are plays that can't be produced because they are non-marketable?
- 'Death of the imagination' in the mainstream was lamented.
- By contrast, young people's theatre was praised for its imaginative work
- The sharp irony of the fact that only established writers e.g. C.Churchill, M. Crimp, Pinter etc have the freedom to experiment was noted. It's practically impossible for new, emerging or mid-career writers to experiment and get produced by New Writing venues.
- Fetishization of the new and especially the young limits what can be produced and narrows theatrical fields of vision, as well as producing work that is samey.
- The system here should be more geared to freedom

Open Space 3 - The Role of the Dramaturg / Literary Manager

Open Space 4 - New /Innovative Theatre - what does this mean?

Convenor – Vicky Ireland

Are there set (old) perceptions that need constantly challenging in order to create the new?

Is the old, (the well-made play) not good enough? Why do we have to change and challenge it constantly?

Using new approaches is one dimension towards creating exciting theatre, but is new only about "wowing" people?

New can be superficial. New is tied to consumerism. New is the "old" new.

When does new stop being new and become old? Why is some old good and some old bad? Who decides?

New creates a lot of waste. We don't revisit, because we won't get funding, no "second time production" monies, - thousands of plays just blowing in the wind.

Can't we hang onto the good for longer? Europe continues doing our new writing longer than we do.

We must be careful innovation doesn't simply address form, but also content.

We can't divorce form from content

Yes, we are looking for new voices but form should serve content, otherwise we are creating novelty. That's not enough, is it?

Or, are we too puritanical about novelty? Perhaps we have a problem with pleasure. We demand that Art has to be more than just having a good time. Why?

Experimental Theatre was the old definition of innovation.

Experimentation is vital but must be thought through.

A collaborative team has to work together and managerial structures can serve playwriting poorly.

The work of Punchdrunk (Faust, Mask of the Red Death - site specific with promenade/dance performances, very strong on atmosphere) was cited as both new and innovative and it was acknowledged although some may be

uncomfortable about the head-on relationship of the performers with the audience, the work had to be acknowledged as inspiring.

Has performance art done our world a disservice - has it given innovation a bad name?

Is some sort of cultural sense needed to establish an over-view, in order to recognise what's new and/or innovative against the "old?"

Not everybody works by the same rules -

Not everybody sees all the work and what is being achieved -

New is a lazy word.

Are we caught between the Scylla of the funders and the Charybdis of the critics?

Funders are pre-occupied with audience, constantly urging work to "be new" in order to reach a new generation.

Does new achieve anything other than impress and pander to the jaded pallet of the critics?

The press creates labels which don't always help.

Innovation is often linked to science and technology because all the other arts forms we link to are "old."

Is it wonderful synergy that we're seeking?

Robert Wilson's "H.G." was mentioned as a brilliant example of this, where we were invited to be a child again, to rediscover our senses and see where they took us, to play.

Theatre has to move especially for the next generation, how do we get them in?

What do we do that doesn't involve them "sitting in a proscenium arch space listening to bits of papyrus?"

We need to get fun and excitement back, but not over-excite the young so that they run amuck!

Young people are the "I want to have it now," generation.

They are flocking to concerts and music is primal. Why can't theatre have this effect?

How do we make wonderful, dynamic, irresistible work, that is neither old nor young, just good?

Quality ingredients, craft in motion, uplifting vision and two fingers to funders and critics.

Open Space 5 - How do we encourage young people to write for theatre?

Convenor: Danny Braverman

Some strands of conversation

Barriers to young people writing

Class

Lack of aspiration and role models

Seeing inspiring stuff

Curriculum / school

Emphasis on devising
The word "theatre"
Not seen as a collaborative thing
Lack of confidence
Dumbing down – young people appreciate quality

Where Its happening

When framed as event, not theatre
Good programmes with clear offers
When its collaborative
Spoken word
Places like Royal Court Young Writers Scheme
Contrast between Theatre Is "Its Our Theatre", which allows writing /
theatre making to emerge for the process and Theatre Is joint venture
with University of Hertfordshire which followed a very traditional model
of a playwriting competition and yielded a very non-diverse take-up

Other remarks

Young people need places and spaces to congregate
We need to create the space for young people's engagement
Drama students are remarkably unradical these days
The cult of the individual has promoted the individual over the collective
Where is the language of youth culture
Where is the punk aesthetic?
In the 60s and 70s there was a context for supporting dissenting voices
40 years ago there was a certainty you could change the world and now
there is a certainty you cant.

Image

Also from Edward Bond's keynote address at the Birmingham 2002 ACE
symposium on theatre for young people

"They collected this group of young people from a particular school and
from a local young people's resource centre and said 'we're going to do
this play'. The young people didn't even know what a play was or what it
could do. They had 16 or 17 young people in a room. It was the first
time they had been together in a room like that to do a play. I think
they dealt with one of two scenes. The young people suddenly realised,

oh yes, they could get involved, they could say this, they could have an opinion about that, not always get something wrong, but really have an opinion 'well, I think this' and 'I think the other', which mattered because they thought it. They not only said it, they showed it – which is a profound way of saying. I am told (I wasn't there) it was extraordinary. Suddenly the young people were excited, committed, very partisan among themselves – that is right, this is right and that is wrong, I like that. So it went very well. And then it was over. The rehearsal was finished and the kids went out, and the person in charge said 'pew, I wouldn't have believed it! They actually knew what this complicated play is talking about'. I said to him later 'well yes, but young people do, it's the adults who often have the problem'. Well, immediately after the rehearsal he went outside. Standing out on the street was one of the young people who'd been in the group and in fact, had been the most engaged, creative, intelligent, intense – well, one of them anyway – and he was standing out in the street and he had a stone in his hand. He was trying to break the windows of the house in which he had rehearsed."

Final thought

Will the Obama factor and the digital age create circumstances for a renewed , young voice?

Open Space 6 - How does the Playwrights' Network go on without Writernet?

The discussion was hosted & noted by Julie Ellen (Playwrights' Studio Scotland)

Participants in this discussion included;
Daniel Bye (Script Yorkshire), Hanna Slattné (Tinderbox NI), Chris Bridgeman (North West Playwrights),

Items in bold are for immediate action

The first area of discussion was; what is the need? What do we lose?

Key points that arose were;

- Jonathan & Sarah were drivers of strategic importance
- PN harnesses the varied briefs towards specific projects
- PN links playwrights dynamically across the UK
- The PN members (individuals) have a particular role in their own right.

Therefore have their own CDP needs

- PN is vital for Lobbying – organisations & audiences
- PN creates an ability to find a voice collectively for tiny orgs
- PN provides an intellectual gymnasium for what we do

What are the possible ways forward?

- To resource our selves to participate so we're not failing to meet whilst looking for money (e.g. cover own travel costs)
- To pool/average out the costs so those travelling furthest don't suffer
- To use internet based resources
- Use the interface between Playwrights' Network & Dramaturg/Lit Managers Network (could they be one?)
- Decide to meet again & set a date
- Julie Ellen will co-ordinate Playwrights Network for 2009
- Individuals could take on specific functions to share the load
- Playwrights' Studio, Scotland will take up conversation with Writernet about hosting the interactive map & the cost
- Regional Operators will look to cover similar knowledge/info sets within their own websites

There was also a short discussion about the role of the Dramaturg and Dramaturgical practice.