

# Van or tardis?

what will enable playwrights and playwrighting in Wales to engage with contemporary society?

(even better than they undoubtedly already are)...

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## **You wouldn't want to start from here**

This document reflects on a symposium held by the Arts Council of Wales and is for playwrights, cultural operators who care about playwrighting in Wales and funders & policy makers.

For those reading this who want to know the answer to the question *actually* posed for the day, I am happy to use the swift reflections on the discussion posted very promptly on the Theatre in Wales site (please see appendix one).

The Boyden recommendations in 2004's Arts Council of Wales' *Proposals to Develop English Language Theatre* contain many good things but don't currently appear deliverable (with a few important exceptions). The challenge then becomes how to rethink the boom or bust tendency of the all encompassing strategy which is not subsequently realisable.

In reformulating the core objectives relating to playwrighting within the wider ecology of theatre in Wales, what might be done....differently?

In Ireland, I'm told, when asking directions a not atypical response might begin, "well you wouldn't want to start from here...."

Let me begin then by tilting the question posed in the title of the seminar. I want to focus on *what will enable* playwrights and playwrighting in Wales to engage with contemporary society (even better than they undoubtedly already are).

The purpose of exploring other nations, models, systems is of course to come again, afresh at the challenges faced at home.

Before we can consider *what will enable* playwrights and playwrighting in Wales to engage, perhaps we need to disengage in order to re-engage.....

The symposium invited participants to consider practice in Scotland and in particular, a model in Edinburgh. But before we look at Scotland, let us take a brief detour and visit their auld allies: the French...

The recursivity of the writing process is closely related to the recursive process by which the pedestrian navigates the built environment. The writing process, like the act of walking through a city, involves a conscious mediation between complex tasks.....

In *L'Invention du quotidien I: arts de faire*, translated into English as *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel Certeau develops a stance that enables the citizen-consumer to occupy a position of power.

Certeau's position is nearly the opposite of that supposed by Michel Foucault.

While Certeau and Foucault are both interested in the relation between the individual and a monolithic power structure (expressed most famously as the panopticon by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*), Certeau maintains that the individual, and individuality, can survive, while Foucault views all practices as tainted and made possible by this centralized power.

For Certeau, the consumer is not a docile or manipulated subject. Instead, the process of consumption enables the consumer to interact with and affect change in a western capitalistic society.

Throughout *Arts de Faire*, Certeau relies on his discussion of the pedestrian in order to develop his conception of the citizen as active participant in civic life. The unifying characteristic of the power of the consumer-citizen is the extent to which actions imply creation, the ability to "make" something hidden and individual from the received materials and patterns of cultural practices. The "practice" of everyday life is based on the process by which practical objects or discourses are derived from daily activity. The practice of the consumer citizen, Certeau asserts, manages to avoid systemic control....

...The connection between mobility and communication doesn't surprise us. The term metaphor is itself based on the Greek for "transport." And our own daily practices are clearly situated within the fibre-optic confines of the information age. But Certeau focuses most specifically on walking. The pedestrian, unlike the motorist or the subway passenger, is not absolutely trapped by the machinery of the power structure. The pedestrian, whose movements are unscripted, guided by the greater trans-political laws of chance and fate, escapes the gaze of the glazed eye perched on the power pyramid.

*Recursivity: Navigating Composition and Space*, Jason Snart and Dean Swinford in *Agora*, an online graduate journal, University of Florida, October 29, 2001

[www.humanities.ualberta.ca/agora/Articles.cfm?ArticleNo=116](http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/agora/Articles.cfm?ArticleNo=116)

The playwright as pedestrian: it is not for nothing that the mobility of the individual artist has become a European cultural policy priority. What new metaphors might we find useful that cut across established boundaries and hierarchies for our future mobility as a community of playwrights and those interested in playwrighting?

## Taxis and vans

So, I arrive in Cardiff at 00.30. Pumpkin time has come and gone. No carriage awaits. I emerge from Central Station and it is very quiet. Do they really roll up the pavements here? The train is late; I'm tired but I need to wake up. I drift over to the taxi rank and ask an Asian driver whether my hotel is walkable. With no concessions to a lost fare he gives me firm directions and off I go. Two streets later I spot a young man swaying, smiling. I like to check that I'm moving in the right direction. He is amused that a drunk Australian student is giving me guidance in the Welsh capital. I turn the corner and whoah, Cardiff has *not* gone to bed. I get a text on my phone. Do I know where I'm going? Not with certainty, but I'm enjoying finding out....From within the melee, two young black girls keep me on track and I glide off the main drag. I must be getting close now but everyone has disappeared again. Three guys swing into view, one of whom looks like a young Will Smith. His accent sounds Dutch. They've just come from where I'm going. Bingo....Next morning Ian Rowlands tells me this young Will Smith is an actor....

If I had taken the taxi...

Another metaphor of transport which struck a chord with me at the symposium was the van. The van is the mobile "the gang's all here" approach to flexible hit-and-run theatre. No need for major institutions or urban exclusivity. The van celebrates the fact that as a child over the last 20 years in Wales you are probably more likely to see a piece of theatre than anywhere else in the UK. But the van is also limited, like the black box it suggests economies of scale and can clip the creative imagination as much as liberate it.

How might we reimagine the van, so that it can become a tardis?

## Scenius

It should be possible to determine quality along a spectrum of work and from a range of contexts, for engaging with the contemporary is as much about context as about content. The playwright working with a group of single mothers on a housing estate in Hunslet is as vital and connected to contemporary society as she who is on the main stage at the Royal Court.

There are changes to mechanisms which may help move things on, and a new approach to securing investment and identifying resources is essential, but it strikes me that we may need to shift our collective critical thinking and discourse and find a different approach in Wales to identity and diversity if we are to break through and not be having the same conversations in 5 years time as we did 5 , 10 or 15 years ago... (see appendix two)

***in italics are shards of what I heard or thought I heard at the symposium...What follows is a personal reflection...***

*How playwrights engage with contemporary society needs to move beyond the implicit model of the Great Welsh Hope*

the genius model in culture needs to be replaced...

A few years ago I came up with a new word. I was fed up with the old art-history idea of genius – the notion that gifted individuals turn up out of nowhere and light the way for all the rest of us dummies to follow. I became (and still am ) more and more convinced that the important changes in cultural history were actually the product of very large numbers of people and circumstances conspiring to make something new. I call this '**scenius**' – it means 'the intelligence and intuition of a whole cultural scene'. It is the communal form of genius. ....

.....One of the reasons I am attached to this idea is that it is capable of dignifying many more forms of human innovation under its umbrella than the old idea of 'genius', which exemplifies what I called the 'Big Man' theory of history – where events are changed by the occasional brilliant or terrible man, working in heroic isolation. I would prefer to believe that the world is constantly being remade by all its inhabitants: that it is a co-operative enterprise. Folk arts and popular arts have always been criticised because they tend to exhibit evolutionary, incremental change. – because they lack sufficient 'Big men' making shockingly radical and unpopular steps in the future.

Instead the pop scene carries much of its audience with it - something the fine arts people are inclined to distrust: the secret question is, 'How can it possibly be good if so many people like it?'.....But I want to say that the reality of how culture and ideas evolve is much closer to the one we as pop musicians are liable to accept - of a continuous toing and froing of ideas and imitations and misconstruals, of things becoming thinkable because they are suddenly technically possible. Of action and reaction, than the traditional fine-art model which posits an inspired individual sorting it all out for himself and then delivering it unto a largely uncomprehending and ungrateful world...

..... In all of these sequences, there are sufficient gifted and eccentric individuals to satisfy anyone's hero appetite, but the interesting thing is how they were fed and supported by a vigorous and diffuse cultural scene. That's the process I would like to explore.

Brian Eno in *A Year with Swollen Appendices: Brian Eno's Diary*  
Faber and Faber 1996

what might this mean in practice?

Our main point on Cultural leadership would be around clear and strategic investment in the peer networks that create a framework that drives up quality (practitioner, product and management) - an upward spiral of improvement if you like - the critical mass through which quality emerges and new leaders (and types of leadership) are identified and supported.

Susan Jones

Director of Programmes, a-n The Artists Information Company

Of course once you do away with big men, you might find you need more women....Quietly, over the last eighteen months the South West Theatre Writing Network has been developing in England. Men participate but the network is curated, driven and developed by women. It offers a different energy, a different dynamic; a pragmatism and a laterality; a willingness to relate and create something collectively. If we want to change the culture in which we work, we have to look at who we are.....

## **Diversities**

Walking through Cardiff in the early hours of the day of the symposium I was struck by its vibrancy, its warmth and its diversity.

*The whole theatre ecology means continuity of access to work, for audiences and arts practitioners for all ages. This has implications of touring, but also for how we characterise and give metaphor to our diversity and its sustenance. A framework through which to write and view the world. Without an ideological and cultural framework, the corpus will be narrow. But if we become ideologically entrenched then dialogue is superseded. The audience is part of the framework. Theatre is made in the audience. Society is in the front line of playwrights' concerns*

## **Access and progression routes**

*a new writing culture which gives renewal to the theatre and allows audiences to see work and acts as a gateway to the classics (rather than vice versa)*

*Grow theatre up from the ground. Give young people access to theatre practice.....young people don't necessarily watch theatre and learn*

There is a sectoral responsibility here for curating the reference points for young people – with implications for Higher Education & Further Education. This includes a contemporary repertoire from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>

This also links to the riposte from one theatre management to the Monsterists (see [www.monsterists.com](http://www.monsterists.com)) that playwrights need the vision for a mainstage play, as nearly all scripts received are for studios. Playwrights need permission, encouragement and the dramaturgical tools to write *large scale, large concept, large cast* plays if for a generation they have been watching the work of playwrights who have been self censoring according to a deliverable economic model.

*with community groups the landscape is bigger*

.....This is an example of remaking the van into a tardis

## **Developing critical mass, cultural capacity, critical buzz**

*The Edinburgh Festival raises global awareness more quickly, of both UK and international work. In this sits the Traverse which aims to produce 6-10 new plays a year and provides excellent international work and literary expertise. There are other facets noted..*

- *a fringe around the main festival*



- *a distributive network*
- *the Glasgow Herald, The Scotsman providing a robust critical focus*

Drawing on the Traverse model Wales *may* need a new writing theatre in Cardiff to feed the country, and even a major festival to augment those distributive channels, but if it isn't going to yield the investment necessary to achieve this, what else?

Katherine Mendelsohn responded to one of the many observations from the floor of quite how unlike Edinburgh Cardiff is, by suggesting that if you don't have the (what used to be broadsheet) papers creating a critical buzz you can create your own critical fora. The real growth is online, she said. This both nods to Charles Leadbeater's analysis (which Arts Council England, the Theatre Managers Association (TMA), Society of London Theatres (SOLT) and the Independent Theatre Council (ITC) seem to have swallowed whole - more of him later) and foreshadows the Theatre in Wales website. It also might suggest that sometimes it is easier to reveal yourself in cyber-space...

Its already here, and the Theatre In Wales site is recognised by many in the profession as a model of its kind...

To the appendix giving an impression of the day's discussions, I would merely add that another potential success from the day, on the principle of offers and requests which had been begun by Greg Cullen and Simon Harris, is a potential collaboration on a bilingual Welsh/sign language play....

But the Theatre In Wales site is not an organisation with Revenue Funding client status with the Arts Council of Wales. It is driven by something else....Passion, but also a combination of access, participation and a reconfiguration of what might sometimes be viewed as professionalism.

## The Pro-Am revolution

is just one of the lines which the DEMOS cultural thinker Charles Leadbeater is currently promoting

From astronomy to activism, from surfing to saving lives, Pro-Ams - people pursuing amateur activities to professional standards - are an increasingly important part of our society and economy.

For Pro-Ams, leisure is not passive consumerism but active and participatory, it involves the deployment of publicly accredited knowledge and skills, often built up over a long career, which has involved sacrifices and frustrations.

*The Pro-Am Revolution* argues this historic shift is reversing. We're witnessing the flowering of Pro-Am, bottom-up self-organisation and the crude, all or nothing, categories of professional or amateur will need to be rethought.

Many of the defining features of professionalism also apply to Pro-Ams: they have a strong sense of vocation; they use recognised public standards to assess performance and formally validate skills; they form self-regulating communities, which provide people with a sense of community and belonging; they produce non-commodity products and services; they are well versed in a body of knowledge and skill, which carries with it a sense of tradition and identity.

Professionals are distinguished by the nature of their knowledge. Professionals are more likely to understand the theory behind good practice, while Pro-Ams might have strong know-how and technique.

The stronger theoretical knowledge base of the professionals should allow them more scope for analysis and generalisation. It's easy to be a Pro-Am stargazer, but difficult to be a Pro-Am theoretical physicist. The relationship between amateurs and professionals is becoming more fluid and dynamic. It is not a zero-sum game. Professionals and Pro-Ams can grow together.

Pro-Ams demand that we see professionals and amateurs along a continuum. Fully-fledged professionals are at one end of the spectrum, but close by we have pre-professionals (apprentices and trainees), semi-professionals (who earn a significant part of their income from an activity) and post-professionals (former professionals who continue to perform or play once their professional career is over.) These latter three groups of 'quasi' professionals are Pro-Ams.

Charles Leadbeater

*The Pro-Am Revolution, How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society*, Charles Leadbeater, Paul Miller, Demos 2004

Of course theatre in Wales is ahead of the UK game here in some respects....

Most playwrights are pro-am.

But there are risks in being overly seduced by Leadbeater's future-casting. Further collapsing the boundaries between producer/consumer, along the axis of professional/amateur might give us a model of a C21<sup>st</sup> Arts organisation rather closer to Foucault rather than Certeau, as playwright Gabriel Gbadamosi, in his Report on the Theatre 2005 Conference, for SOLT, TMA & ITC reveals...(For playwrights engage with contemporary society in part by analysing, reflecting and reformulating, then critiquing it)

Leadbeater spoke of the need to forge a new consensus on the value of the arts in the context of participative, 'talkback' technologies. He saw them as precursors to both 'tribalised' (I would say, customised) culture and a convergence of the professional and the amateur in leisure industries. His main example consisted of the potential for post-show blogging as an extension of audience participation and as a way to bypass inadequate critical coverage in the existing media.

Arts organisations, he argued, need to re-calibrate the balance between their administrative and creative roles in order to simplify and focus their core creative activity. They also need to adapt to change with what he called 'visionary opportunism' - a management principle involving 'attraction', or attractiveness, in respect of rapidly changing markets in resources, personnel, products, positioning and scope. Arts organisations will need to think hard about the 'tone' they set to ensure their own survival in a new phase of our society.

....

Gabriel Gbadamosi, Report on the Theatre 2005 Conference, for SOLT, TMA & ITC

Visionary opportunism? hmmm. As Mark Ravenhill says, you can make a killing in the theatre, but you can't make a living.

## **Talent and investment**

*There are great playwrights in Wales, but they cannot get through the glass ceiling and on to the main stages*

- *there is more than enough talent and ability*
- *its not a complicated question and answer*
- *you have to invest over 5-10 years*
- *we have to be brave and learn to be more critical*

What if glass ceilings are less there to be shattered and more as agents of refraction and reflection? In their height they seem curiously unreachable, yet the premise of unidirectional progression upwards seems a strange one, and not akin to the movement and working lives of most arts practitioners I know...

### **Collegiality, camaraderie, networks**

*If we in Wales lack a theatre ecology then we have to co-ordinate one . Because it's there, it's just not coming together. Understanding relationships need to be made. This cannot happen so long as everyone is watching their backs and there is a climate of fear, mistrust and suspicion around arranged marriages and shotgun weddings.*

In Wales there is a lack of awareness of other playwrights' work both currently and of the most recent generation. The parochial hierarchies of who counts as Welsh still hover spectrally. If we define our diversity solely in devolutionary and segregationist terms then playwrights and playwrighting will not engage with how we live now.

We might have left the symposium believing that playwrights in Scotland were all cosy in their collegiality. They are not, they can be as vicious and vituperative as the next group of artists. But what they are is engaged and connected. And in their mobility they use their shared knowledge to move round some of the obstacles to progression that they encounter.

### **Publishing and co-production**

Shared knowledge can be made manifest through networks and peer support, but the *availability and legacy of plays is important ; the curriculum in Wales says you can study any playwright who has been published twice.*

Publication doesn't happen because it isn't part of the production base of the theatre infrastructure and while literature specialists inherently see its value they can feel ambiguous towards their ostensibly wealthier theatre cousins, so initiatives which place playwrights (as opposed to playwrighting) at the centre can prove problematic.

It is not just publication that is required, it is distribution networks to disseminate and provide access to publications, but this might be a manageable intervention, especially if it can be connected to Cultural Entitlement education agendas (more later, on leveraging in funds from outside the arts)

*Partnership models which ensure availability of work, for example co-production at The Drum in Plymouth*

Shared knowledge is also a necessary pre-requisite of co-production. The nervousness around co-production links back to forced marriages. Where added value for all partners can be demonstrated then co-production can work excellently. But it is not a universal panacea and it can have knock on effects (for example in the overall budget which is then available for commissioning original plays as opposed to known quantities, or translations/adaptations - and the time frame in which commissions have to be delivered).

### **Forced marriages?**

*There was a Made In Wales symposium entitled...No Place to Go 10 years ago.*

*What has changed? (please see appendix two)*

*There are no miners if there are no mines  
Nowhere to send scripts. No output*

*Requests for ring fenced funds*

The carrot and stick situates us still in a Foucault paradigm. This doesn't move us on.

Edward Bond says that the only thing that comes between playwrights and audiences is *the theatre*. So without undue recourse to Gramsci or Adorno - if you want to you can resist the hegemonic forces of commodification and work around them

Or, consider entrepreneurship and networked culture as a post-industrial re-negotiation (rather than visionary opportunism).

### ***It starts here***

- **we** must create the conditions
- let's stop talking comparative histories
- let's work across languages (and contexts) bilingual plays
- let's be honest about what we do
- let's reward excellence

we have to make the van into a tardis, collectively. There is no Dr Who.

### **Models for longer term consideration**

We all know what happened to Made in Wales....

Is there a mismatch between companies who are not accessing the talent and the talent not accessing the companies? and if so why and what may be done?

What will happen to Sgript Cymru and its possible links with The Sherman?

Can you have a strategic development agency serving the whole of the nation attached to a particular building?

**Theatre Writing Partnership** is a new writing organisation that started its life in February 2001. Unique to the East Midlands region, it was set up to enable a greater creative collaboration on the development of new theatre writing across its producing theatres (Derby Playhouse, Leicester Haymarket, New Perspectives, Nottingham Playhouse and Royal and Derngate Theatres, Northampton). Staff and associate artists are complemented by a working group drawn from these theatres

### **Commissions**

They work closely with their partner theatres on new plays for their programmes, and throughout the year provide dramaturgical support on a number of commissions. There are a number of routes through which they themselves, and the theatres come to commission writers. TWP's projects and productions are currently project-funded, and each event is a unique collaboration, which will be planned over several months as they raise the money to deliver the work.

Meanwhile, the theatres are able to commission work at varying levels (this is dependant on their funding level and new writing policy). On the positive side, there is a huge increase in the volume of work under commission today than at the time TWP was first launched, which is a testament to the success of the project. In all cases writers are commissioned because they have a special enthusiasm for their work. In the case of TWP they are very committed to writers living and/or working in the East Midlands region, and early-career playwrights in particular. Through their initiatives, playwriting courses, workshops and mentoring they discover and build the creative relationships, which feed their ongoing productions and activities.

### **Dramaturgy**

In addition to their own projects, they support the dramaturgy of some of the new plays in development at their partner theatres. Over the last five years the new commissions they have supported include: *Bollywood Jane*, by Amanda Whittington, *The Palace of Fear*, by Philip Osment, *The Illustrious Corpse*, by Tariq Ali, *The Fortune Club*, by Dolly Dhingra (for Leicester Haymarket Theatre); *Satin n Steel*, by Amanda Whittington, *Mother Courage and her Children* adapted by Dipo Agboluaje (for Nottingham Playhouse).

### **Script Reading**

Many of their Associate Artists are based in the region and therefore have a leading role in determining their policy and vision. In view of their commitment to East Midlands artists they run a script-reading service for writers based in the region. If you send your script to them, you can expect a page of feedback and recommendations on how you might develop the play further. At the moment this service is free. The team includes TWP staff and associate artists, professional theatre makers and established playwrights.

### **Participatory Work**

Their commitment to young artists means they run a number of young writers' groups across the region, which are open to anyone who is interested in taking part. They also undertake workshops in schools and colleges. In the context of specific projects they may run other workshops, which are open to the public. ....

But it might also be worth considering some other examples

Despite the successes of the Traverse and Katherine Mendelsohn's eloquent presentation at the symposium, it is rare that one producing focus can satisfy the new writing needs of an entire nation

### **The Playwrights' Studio, Scotland**

The Playwrights' Studio, Scotland is a new national initiative designed to directly engage the people of Scotland with new playwriting and raise the standard of plays for presentation to the public. It celebrates, promotes and develops Scotland's rich and growing culture of writing for live performance; improving and sustaining artistic quality, raising awareness, and increasing access to new playwriting. The idea for a playwrights' studio was championed over many years by Tom McGrath and the Traverse Theatre. In 2001 the Scottish Arts Council funded research which clearly demonstrated the demand for the Playwrights' Studio from playwrights, their membership organisation the Scottish Society of Playwrights and others for whom the quality of new playwriting is

significant. In response to these findings the SAC awarded funding and support to establish the Playwrights' Studio, Scotland. The Playwrights' Studio is led by Creative Director, Julie Ellen with support from Operations Manager, Caroline Newall and an annually appointed team of Associate Playwrights, currently David Greig, Liz Lochhead and Nicola McCartney, soon to be succeeded by Chris Hannan, John Clifford and Peter Arnott.

.....then there is **New Writing North** in Newcastle where literature and theatre are not seen as mutually exclusive - which is a whole other way to go. Writers working across all media and a wide range of contexts are supported..

The models are all very well, of course, but the quality of a working model can only be judged by the people who inhabit them. Esther Richardson, Julie Ellen and Claire Malcolm are self evidently excellent at what they do. Models must also be analysed in their context. These three women were appointed into newly created entities which had both the buy-in of the sector and the support of the funders. They had ready made partnerships and created others...



## **Wales – a Mediterranean prospect?**

I was involved in a small way in the creation of both New Writing North and the Playwrights Studio, Scotland. I believe that both succeeded in part because they combined strategic vision with tactical knowhow

Strategic and tactical development is part of the market planning process and should follow market research to understand the motivations of existing customers or target market companies. Otherwise, the development of strategy and tactics may be based on erroneous assumptions and any ensuing planning may be flawed.

*strategy is a statement of the basic intent and external means of the company to accomplish its internal objectives.*

*Tactics are a series of specific actions necessary to support and accomplish the strategic, overall plan.* This states that if an action does not support the strategy, it cannot be an effective tactic.

[www.kochgroup.com/strategicplanning.html](http://www.kochgroup.com/strategicplanning.html)

But without the vision strategy is arid.

Marshall McLuhan's dictum; "In the global village the centre is everywhere and the periphery is nowhere" extends what is more customarily associated with Pascal but is, in fact, first found in a pseudo-Hermetic treatise of the twelfth century.

In today's world, our consciousness is dominated by this notion of centre-periphery. If you live in New York you have access to information, entertainment, people, restaurants, and more. If you're out in the middle of the Gobi Desert, you're often at a severe disadvantage in terms of your access to information and entertainment. The world that I envision, which is being made more and more possible through distributed power and wireless communications technology, is a world where no matter how isolated you are, you have the same opportunities and access to information as the people in New York do

*Massive Change, The Future of Global Design*

[www.massivechange.com/RobertFreling.html](http://www.massivechange.com/RobertFreling.html)

what does this say about Welsh cultural identity? (And the model of the Scottish national theatre?)

what does it suggest for a playwrighting community engaging with contemporary society?

We began with France, and it is to the Mediterranean I want to return on my meandering journey.

It is not only the time before, the Mediterranean-as-identity, but the Mediterranean-as-prospect which best describes what it is all about: a "space-motion, in the full sense of the word" (*Braudel*), the source of perpetual flows and encounters which make both the Mediterranean and Europe a place of relations, dialogue and confrontation. Nothing here is hierarchically organised around a fixed axis: the centre is everywhere.

In this sense the Biennale will deal with some of the most interesting issues which concern the young artists of our time: landscape and space, the new experiences of travelling, relationships, the environment, the quest for the alternative and the impossible, mobility....

Biennial for Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean,  
*Athens, 6-16, June, 2003*

[www.geocities.com/inizjamedmalta/ateni\\_cosmos.htm](http://www.geocities.com/inizjamedmalta/ateni_cosmos.htm)

### **From cash dispenser to development agency (or van to tardis)**

The former is a favourite phrase of Sir Christopher Frayling, Chair Arts Council England.... –

If Arts Council of Wales is serious about being more than a cash dispenser and commissioner of overarching strategies, then it might usefully

- deliver change laterally
- curate a network of support for new writing
- locate resources from outside the arts sector and facilitate the sector's access to them
- up the ante
- identify a range of progression routes
- invest in professional development
- extend the life of quality work through second and subsequent production and publication
- look at different models for a support agency for writers ; an organisation that embraces and promulgates the breadth of theatre languages that constitute dramaturgy; is resourced to engage in a pro-active accessing of talent, and the maintenance of that talent; a dynamic agency with a knowledge of future needs
- ask questions which allow us to move on.
- create a plan that is deliverable that will take us forward

Wales-as-prospect? why not?  
through playwrights, cultural operators, funders and policy makers re-  
imagining, then reformulating its diversities, its mobilities

van or tardis?

Jonathan Meth  
September 2005

## Appendix One

### **Are playwrights engaging with contemporary society?**

The answer to the question was largely taken for granted by most people attending the conference. Some theatre writers regarded the question as patronising and insensitive and not needing to be asked. Fortunately we were spared litanies of the social and relevance of their programmes from the working theatre directors in attendance. Sadly such wisdom didn't spread itself throughout the whole of the seminar but for most of the time the passion and commitment and the frustration of the working artist at the conference commanded the respect and attention of the distinguished assembly.

Even a tiny speck of understanding emerged from The Arts Council. From the Chairman Geraint Talfan Davies and reflected by Chief Executive Peter Tyndall but I also suspected that they had already worked out how they would address the current problems almost regardless of what any consultation might produce. A useful discussion could have followed had they aired a potential proposal and listened to the floor's reaction to it.

The debate was sparked by an excellent presentation from guest speaker, Katherine Meldelsohn, Literary Manager of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh with her well-established track record in dramaturgy and the promotion of new playwrights. The room buzzed with envy as she outlined the Traverse's on-going record of commissioning and presenting 6-10 new writers each year and in Wales' terms the relatively large budget that the Edinburgh theatre has available for this vital work. It is interesting to note that currently Sgript Cymru, Wales' only dedicated new writing company, is now only able to produce two [English language] productions per year. Sitting beside her at the top table was a young Scottish 'new writer' Martin Taylor whose latest [first] work East Coast Chicken Supper had recently been commissioned by the Traverse as part of this year's Festival. He was very upbeat and positive and acknowledged the great value that the support of a well-established organisation meant to an emerging writer in Scotland. It did seem that 'The Authorities', who ever they maybe, in Scotland had a much higher regard for the value and significance of new writing than the 'The Authorities' have in Wales.

One well-established Welsh-based writer protested that he had acquired his success without a penny of subsidy. A company producer claimed that some devious political motivation had prevented them from taking up a project from one well respected director and entrepreneur. Another well-known Welsh writer complained that he hadn't even had a response to his phone call,

following his submission of a script to one highly regarded Welsh Company. I believe this confrontation ended happily, a commission now being in the pipeline.

The cry then came for a new writing theatre based in Wales, most probably in Cardiff. This was cautioned against by the wisdom of the more experienced theatre practitioners in the audience. But the weight of the room seemed in favour. Whilst this might not prove an utter disaster, I certainly wouldn't want to put any of money on it being a success. What it will more likely be is just another Great Welsh Part-Politically-Motivated Fudge! Like the setting up of a ring of touring theatre in the early seventies, the beginnings of the Sherman, the Welsh Assembly's attempt to take over the Arts Council, the establishment of a Welsh National Theatre in only one of our languages and the latest, The Wales Millennium Centre. I had looked forward to this mighty new establishment becoming a beacon of excellence in Theatre administration and programme planning. But I guess the jury is still out on that one. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin with its Peacock Theatre dedicated to the promotion of new Irish writing still throws in the occasional Shakespeare and other masters of playwriting to guide the new boys on their way.

It was acknowledged that most of all the theatre work taking place in Wales at the moment is new writing, resulting in the fact that it's very hard for an aspiring writer to see a well written play and perhaps it's one of the reasons that we don't get that many of them put on in Wales. Though I would say that there were sufficient writers in that room with just a few who were unable to attend, who would be able to provide Wales with plays of a really high international standard, if only there was a well set up project to present their work, to keep us going for many years.

One very positive and practical suggestion did emerge, the setting up of a writer's network and it looks as if something useful will come of this. We could have a virtual network on the Theatre Wales website. Let's give it a go!

In the afternoon Ian Rowlands was wise and as ever, passionate though he was by no means alone in expressing a strong caring note for good quality Welsh Theatre. There's dead wood that needs to (be) cut away to make this a universal achievement. David Adam's great encyclopaedic knowledge of Welsh theatre was acknowledged, Jeni Williams stressed the need for publication and education, I thought I said something amusing, but nobody laughed and Simon Harris asserted the success of his operation, then we all had a cup of tea and went home....

Those in attendance were: - David Adams, critic and academic. Laurence Allen, Playwright. David Alston, Arts Council of Wales. Tim Baker, Clwyd Theatr Cymru. Sara Beer, Disability Arts Cymru. Jon Blake, playwright. Steve Blanford, University of Glamorgan. Michael Bogdanov, The Wales Theatre Company. Elen Bowman, Sgript Cymru. Phil Clark, Sherman Theatre. Geoff Cripps, Rhondda, Cynon Taff. Greg Cullen, playwright. Nicholas Davis, Arts Council of Wales. Angharad Devonald writer. Andy Eagle, Theatr Brycheiniog. Peter Edwards HTV (Wales). Stephen Fisher, Theatre Director. Paul Gibbins, Gwent Theatre. Maggie Hampton Disability Arts Wales. Simon Harris, Sgript Cymru. Richard Hogger, Creu Cymru. Dafydd Hwyl, Cwmni Mega. Mark Jenkins, Playwright. Angharad Jones, S4C. Michael Kelligan, 'On The Edge', www. theatre-wales. Chis Lambert Cardiff Arts Marketing. Kevin Lewis, Theatr Iolo. Gaynor Lougher, Hijinx. Katherine Mendelsohn, Traverse Theatre. Gareth Miles, Writer. Chris Morgan, Hijinx/Theatr Y Byd. Kaite O'Reilly, Writer. Gill Ogden, Aberystwyth University, Louise Osborn, Director/Actor. Alan Osborne, Writer/Librettist. Gary Owen, Writer. Philip Ralph, Actor/Writer. Aled Rhys- Jones, Drama Association of Wales. Ian Rowlands, Writer/Director. Othniel Smith, Writer. Tracey Spottiswoode, Writer and Animationist. Geraint Talfan Davies, Arts Council of Wales. Martin Taylor, Writer (Scotland) Adele Thomas, Director. Peter Tyndall, Arts Council of Wales. Jeni Williams, Trinity College, Carmarthen. Roger Williams, Playwright. Sandra Wynne, Arts Council of Wales. Jonathan Meth, writernet

author: Michael Kelligan

[www.theatr-cymru.co.uk/critical/critical\\_detail.asp?criticalID=206](http://www.theatr-cymru.co.uk/critical/critical_detail.asp?criticalID=206)

## Appendix Two

### But have we been "here" before?

Made In Wales' No Place to Go was mentioned as a reminder that those assembled in the room might largely have been there before. I looked at another MIW symposium.

#### Renaissance Or Reformation

A seminar was held in Cardiff to mark the beginning of a new young writers initiative by **Made in Wales Theatre** Company (MIW). It took place in the week that Peter Gill's "Cardiff East" played The New Theatre and "House Of America" as well as "Twin Towns" were launched.

The panel comprised: Phil George (Head of Features and Documentaries BBC Wales and a MIW Board Member); Jack Bradley (Literary Manager RNT); Ed Thomas (writer ); Pauline McLean (Arts Editor Western Mail); and Lynn Hunter (Legendary actress and MIW Board Member). The main topic of discussion was the lack of Welsh "structures" to develop new writing.

Phil George opened up the discussion with the question "Is there a new energy in new writing for theatre in Wales and elsewhere in Britain and, if there isn't, what can be done to help?" Jack Bradley explained the process that he and The RNT Studio works through with writers primarily taking them out of the "garret" and giving them the opportunity to be connected with a building and its resources. This helps to validate them and makes them believe that writers are a central part of the process. Sometimes they put a play through a rehearsal process without the pressure of a press-night. Sometimes they have the luxury of exploring a play for four weeks and in the fourth week the writer is asked "Do you actually want to show this to anyone?". If they don't want to they can say no. There was a lot of support for validating writers and work.

Ed Thomas explained that it had taken ages to validate that it's all right to be Welsh, it's all right to be a Welsh writer, actor, painter and this apparently flourishing Welsh culture had been completely created in the margins. It's a very muscular 'despite culture' and it's necessary to have structures and bodies with vision, to make the 'despite culture' have a sustainable attitude and future and not just be a (current) flavour? Maybe if everybody gets so turned on by an eclectic arrangement of different voices the people will be shaken into taking responsibility for demanding a better structure, or maybe not. His statement was one of confusion but excitement. "Maybe the revolution wasn't televised but it's a fucking great place to be."

Pauline McLean, as Arts Editor of The Western Mail felt that one of the most perceptible changes has been a change of confidence, a belief in what people are doing. They're not looking to other countries, they're not looking to open a play in London and bring it back here...It's good enough to speak in a Welsh accent.

Lynn Hunter who has spent twenty years working in Wales, and for much of that time with new writing and new writers felt that the basic problem is a lack of proper understanding of how new writing develops and therefore a lack of commitment to it. It is without doubt the most interesting work she does and yet it has the least credibility and the least resources. Much of this work has been in Community Theatre and TIE but this was never credible as it was perceived in some way as a less theatrical form than any other. There is an audience for new writing but the problem with the development of new writing in the past is that the expectation has been far too high. It takes a long time to write a play and the development process is very particular. Funders will offer Made In Wales money to develop new writing but only enough for three weeks rehearsal of the play. The writers are under severe pressure. Audiences come to see it and maybe it's not ready. Somebody could spend three years writing a play and it's demolished in three reviews.

Nicky Delgado a Community Arts Worker agreed that there was a huge gap between the two camps of Community Arts and, for want of a better term, high art. A huge commercial difference between the two stops people developing from the Community into the higher arts areas. One of the problems is that there's very little liaison, networking between those involved in the arts. There's a tremendous amount of young talent in Wales but very little development. There are the writers, the actors, the directors, the designers but little opportunity for them to go anywhere.

Sheila Hannon (Artistic Director Show Of Strength) felt that if you're going to make new writing popular, it is about the writing but it's also about where you go to see it. You have to make people believe that the place is the place to go and the play is the thing to see.

Ed Thomas commented that all these things that are supposed to be creating a buzz, "Twin Towns", "House Of America", "Badfinger", all the bands ... Wales doesn't own any of them. None of the funding comes from Wales. There is no film distribution company in Wales, no (large) record company and no institution that can afford fifteen actors on stage on a regular basis. Most of the actors he knew



would prefer to be working at The National, or The Royal Court or The Donmar because there they'll be better paid....

Steve Davis (Artistic Director Spectacle) explained that confidence means so much and salesmanship is important, sadly, but structures are crucial. It's necessary for him to work with writers who have some kind of record because of economic pressures. Unless there are the structures and funding available you cannot bring on new writers.

Lynn Hunter explained that unlike the RNT Studio, Made In Wales couldn't possibly work on a new play and say to the writer - Do you want anyone to see this? It has to be seen because they've been funded. Jack Bradley responded by trying to explain how new writing is developed and supported in London. "No-one says I'm going to see a new film, you say I'm going to the movies. But, you do say I'm going to see a new play, like you're doing something brave - you have an expectation it's going to disappoint. You're putting the writer in an invidious position. Stephen Daldry at The Royal Court, he's a brilliant fund-raiser - it comes back to money, decided - We'll just put on lots of new plays, stack 'em high and sell 'em cheap. So you can say - That wasn't the best play I've ever seen but never mind, there'll be another one along in three weeks. It works, it's self-feeding and nourishing. Other new writing companies were forced to take more risks...Plays don't have to be perfect. Dominic Dromgoole at The Bush always used to say - I want to do three plays by you, so writers could grow..."

Phil Clark, Artistic Director of the Sherman Theatre agreed that it's important that we companies can commit to work and that it might lose them money. It's necessary in order to build audiences. Six years ago The Sherman did their first show for the under sevens, they're now packed. Nobody talks about it because it's for kids, but it's a new play. There are ways of building audiences but it costs a lot of money. The points that were being discussed in this seminar need a ten year strategy from The Arts Council, the Government and Local Councils.

Phil Clark: If you look at the last thirty years of Welsh theatre, things last for six or seven years and then the carpet is pulled from under it. As soon as you hit something difficult, or do a bad show, you're lost. There's no long-term policy for the arts in Wales, no vision...There is no continuum because there is no vision from the funding bodies, the local councils...

Phil George posed the wider question how much of this is social? English language Wales has seen an industrial culture dying and a

post-industrial culture without a focus. Is it unfair or impossible to expect writers and theatre practitioners to achieve new zest, new definition, new energy because in the end these have to bubble up from society...If society hasn't found itself the writers won't. In response Vanessa Roper-Evans (Well Made Theatre) suggested that one of the reasons those things hadn't bubbled up is because arts institutions are absolutely obsessed with product over process and if you don't have process you won't allow anybody to bubble up.

As the belt has got tighter and tighter and tighter, it became a case of "Well that (last show) didn't work so cut the funding". It's not a social problem at all, the work is being strangled.

Pedr James (TV & Theatre Director) explained that he went to see "Cardiff East" at The New Theatre...It struck him as possibly unique for The New Theatre. Normally at The New Theatre (audiences) don't see shows about people like them, or about people that they might have known or recognise. It seemed that they were delighted to see that.

They knew that it might just be about them so they were prepared to come. Audiences do want to see work that they can relate to, about people that they can recognise...He felt that commercial theatre had understood that since about 1850. That's what Shaftesbury Avenue is about....

Lynn Hunter commented that she didn't doubt that Wales was a great place to be but she was frustrated that they seemed not to be able to tell other people that there was great talent, great work. They have to go away in order that people realise they're any good and that saddened her. Why is it Peter Gill's work, done in London, that is heralded as the great renaissance in Welsh writing? Whether it is or not, it hasn't come out of Wales...

Phil George added that whatever you are, the place to be is now which takes in some of the struggle but also some of the fun and some of the achievement.

Jeff Teare, Director, Made in Wales

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If we have been here before then what will stop us going there again?