

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 its networks, and leading the way on professional development for dramatic writers. Increasingly writernet worked with other bodies to achieve its objectives, for example for over ten years with the theatre committee of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, as a founder member of literature training 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