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Roger Owen

*on a 'dispersed' Welsh-language
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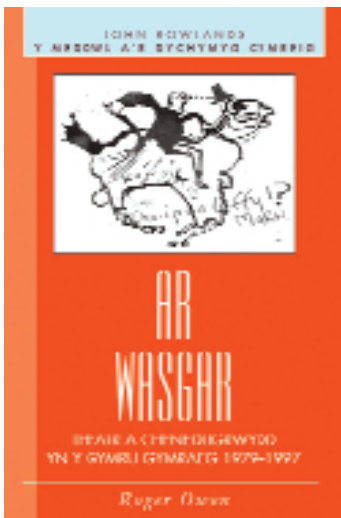
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Ali Briggs as Alfa in peeling
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for New Writing

Irreducible Diversity

Roger Owen

Roger Owen's recently published critical study of Welsh-language theatre between 1979 and 1997, *Ar Wasgar*, is a seminal book on recent performance practice in Welsh. In this article he summarises the material covered in the book, and reflects on the extent to which theatre activity of this period constituted a radically dispersed and dynamically political 'national theatre'.



Roger Owen,
Ar Wasgar:
 Theatr a
 Chenedligrwyd
 d yn y Gymru
 Gymraeg
 1979-1997
 (University of
 Wales Press,
 £14.99 pb
 ISBN
 0708317936)

Ar Wasgar ('Dispersed') charts the work of several Welsh-language theatre companies between 1979 and 1997, and looks at the way in which their collective efforts were defined as the manifestation of a new, disparate national theatre for Welsh-speaking Wales. Its main focus is on the relationship between theatre and community and on the role played by theatre companies and critics in the tactical re-evaluation of national identity at a time of social, cultural and historical crisis. In the book, therefore, I attempted to assess the success and significance of the theatre companies discussed in relation to the prevailing political and social circumstances of the time.

The political and social topography of the years between 1979 and 1997 will be familiar to most readers: this was a period characterized and influenced throughout by Conservative Party rule at Westminster, and by successive crises for the Labour Party both in Wales and the UK as a whole. In its early stages, it also saw meltdown in the traditional industrial areas of Wales and the beginnings of an economic disaster for its rural communities. Later, the prevailing theme became one of reconstruction – the economic regeneration of industrial communities, and the re-engineering of Labour as an electable government being prime examples. In both cases, reconstruction involved a drastic alteration to the fundamental characteristics of the subject.

The fortunes of Welsh-language theatre at this time may not be as familiar, but they do display important similarities in terms of ebb and flow (albeit possibly in reverse). Defining moments in the history of Welsh-language theatre during these years include the formation of Cwmni Theatr Bara Caws in 1977, whose members broke away from Cwmni Theatr Cymru – the flagship Welsh-language theatre company of the day – and became the founders of a small but significant fringe

movement; the decline and eventual collapse of Cwmni Theatr Cymru between 1981 and 1984; and the growing campaign for a reintegrated, single national theatre after about 1995. As in the general history of Wales, there was at the heart of this process a substantial reconstruction, involving a radical modification of the theatre's mode of operation – the demise of Cwmni Theatr Cymru led to a redesignation of the various fringe companies formed after 1977 as a new, dispersed national theatre. However, in this case, reconstruction was followed in the mid-1990s by further meltdown and another substantial revision of the medium's social functioning. Having attempted a bold reinvention of itself as a dynamically disparate enterprise, Welsh-language theatre was eventually repackaged in a more homogenous and possibly less interesting form at the turn of the millennium.

A number of the constituent companies of the dispersed national theatre of the 1980s and 1990s are discussed in *Ar Wasgar*. They include Bara Caws and Cwmni Theatr Gorllewin Morgannwg, which are brought together in a discussion of popular/political theatre; Cwmni Theatr Gwynedd and Theatrïg, discussed as 'mainstream' companies created in order to inherit the national audience fostered by Cwmni Theatr Cymru; Brith Gof and Cwmni Cyfri Tri, physical theatre companies whose work reflected the same influences but whose artistic paths diverged significantly towards the end of the 1980s; and Hwyl a Fflag/Sgwâr Un and Dalier Sylw, discussed, along with several companies specializing in TiE (theatre in education) and theatre for young audiences, as 'unco-ordinated' companies whose brief required them to work in a variety of styles and locations, and who therefore tended to defy classification according to the inherent characteristics of their output. These new companies had relatively little in common with each other: in terms of their style and performance techniques, they were radically different, and these differences meant that any attempt to describe them as a simple or stable homogenous unit could not be sustained. But an important common factor which brought a degree of unity to their status as a diffuse movement was the communitarian character of their operation. Each company, in its own way, attempted to use theatre as a means of signifying their refusal to comply with the social values of the Thatcherite economics of the mid-'80s, and of advertising a sense of solidarity with their own chosen community. The classification of this network of companies as a national institution was also thought to provide an imaginative barrier against the powerfully normative, homogenizing force of Thatcherism by ensuring that an irreducible diversity was at the very heart of the project. In these ways at least, then, the emergence of these new companies did constitute the formation of a single and national theatre movement, albeit one of great complexity and diversity, which forced an imaginative contextualization and disruptive questioning of traditional notions of Welshness and of nationhood.

Advocates of this dispersed model of national theatre (subsequently entitled the 'fleet of coracles') found a pretext for their view in the work of some major commentators on Welsh society. Two of the most evident in this respect were the historian Gwyn A. Williams and the novelist Emyr Humphreys. Williams' compelling description of the progress of Welsh history and identity in *When Was Wales?* (1985) provided a great boost to the spirits of those who, like Williams himself, feared that the progress of the Thatcher government marked 'the elimination of Welsh peculiarities and [...] an integration into Britain more total than anything yet experienced.' He devised a narrative for the history of Wales which examined the Welsh people's response to such instances of crisis and discontinuity in the past. 'The Welsh,' wrote Williams, 'have danced between these giant cogwheels before. Wales has always been now. The Welsh as a people have lived by making and remaking themselves in generation after generation, usually against the odds, usually within a British context. Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to. It requires an act of choice.' Although not a particularly optimistic statement in itself, this idea (or rather this reaffirmation) that Wales was created by the Welsh in their own way was an important source of hope for many, including several theatre practitioners, since it stressed the importance of performance as a means of cultural continuity and of creative disavowal of Thatcherism. In Williams' formulation, Wales became a matter of doing not of being: Welshness, far from being an inalterable condition, was rather a series of practices which, though many of them were rooted in tradition, could also be reinvented, even improvised. In other words, it had strong affiliations with theatre. Similarly, in Emyr Humphreys' discussion of Welsh cultural history, *The Taliesin Tradition* (1983), a comparable emphasis was placed upon performativity and transformation. Humphreys related the dynamic discontinuity in Wales's cultural history to the influence of Taliesin as instigator of the Welsh poetic tradition. The transformational nature of the Taliesinic, argued Humphreys, has been a consistent feature of the history of Wales, and was based upon a persistent interweaving of history and myth. Thus, in effect, Welshness could be distinguished by the suddenness and thoroughness of its transformations, indeed by its implicit lack of predictable historical continuity. Such a notion was particularly welcome to those in Wales who were deeply troubled by the galloping assimilation of Wales into Britain during the early years of the Thatcher government: it suggested that the historical distinctiveness of the Welsh could be reasserted, even in the most trying of times, through history-busting 'self-mythologisation'. In keeping with this idea, the dispersed Welsh-language theatre of the 1980s and 1990s presented itself as a Taliesinic medium of dynamic identity and (dis)continuity at a time when

the democratic political system failed to produce a government which offered a voice to its audience.

This Taliesinic effect in Welsh-language theatre showed itself in several ways. In the early work of Brith Gof and Cwmni Cyfri Tri, for example, reference to historical narrative sources (for Brith Gof, the Four Branches of the Mabinogion; for CC3, folktales and the traditional *Anterliwt*) was combined with production methods derived from experimental or culturally unfamiliar physical techniques. This created a powerful tension between notions of cultural ownership of narrative material and the indefinable, independent position of the actor's body as a means of expression, a tension which tended both to remove the theatre from its specific cultural milieu while reaffirming its position within it. The same tension, it could be argued, was also present in the denuded stages of Bara Caws and Theatr Gorllewin Morgannwg in their overtly political work, and in Theatrïg's reinterpretation of classic Welsh plays according to the tenets of Brecht and the radical staging techniques of Peter Stein: in Theatrïg's epic *Peer Gynt* (1986), for example, the folksy simplicity of individual narrative episodes was offset by the visual density and complexity of the production's composite staging. However, the poetic and playful freedom afforded by the Taliesinic proved increasingly difficult to maintain as the 1980s – and the Thatcher government – progressed. The advent of Thatcherism had profound implications for the politics and culture of contemporary Wales, and challenged many of the certainties which had underpinned Welsh theatre for generations. It forced change by its total redefinition of the nature of the social good: where the previous Keynesian principles of state intervention in economic policy had stressed consensus as a pre-requisite for governance, Thatcherism's basis in monetarism and the free market enshrined competition as the basis for social order. This was substantially at odds with the communitarian ideals which had been at the heart of Welsh-language theatre since its inception. Nevertheless, such was the pervasiveness of Tory rule at this time that even where theatre artists and companies attempted to reimagine, redefine and reconfigure their work in order to resist its influence, their reliance on public subsidy, as well as their need to appeal to the general audience (itself facing the realities of the new hegemony of competitive practice on a daily basis), virtually forced them to yield or become trapped within irreconcilably double standards. The gradual adoption and assimilation of the prevailing Thatcherite ethos was irresistible, and was eventually reflected in the work and artistic policies of most Welsh-language theatre companies. The Taliesinic, such as it was, became enmeshed in struggles to find economically viable ways of supporting professional practice in theatre.

This may be seen in the histories of Bara Caws and Cwmni Theatr Gorllewin Morgannwg. The former, founded in 1977 specifically to

counter the homogenizing, and by that time largely anti-populist, influence of Cwmni Theatr Cymru, soon established itself as a significant force in Welsh-language theatre, espousing not only a quite different set of principles and social ideals from its mainstream counterpart, but also a distinctly socialist set of organizational principles and social goals. The latter, formed in 1981 but performing regularly in Welsh to adult audiences only from 1986 onwards, shared Bara Caws's sense of political mission, but was distinctly a product of its times, and created a body of work which was overwritten by a sense of user-friendliness and entertainment gloss. The early work of both companies was marked by a strong sense of idealism, which manifested itself in the choice of dramatic material, methods of production, policy statements and interviews. In its early years, Bara Caws championed a rough, low-budget style of presentation which directly engaged its audience either through satirical comedy or political critique. In order to facilitate a better relationship with its audience, it voluntarily exiled itself from the recently-erected regional mainstage theatres, suspicious of the social values which such spaces might recommend, and all too aware of their association with the professional theatre mainstream. Instead, it chose to perform in clubs, pubs, local halls or chapel vestries – any space, in fact, which a local audience might feel that they had already claimed as their own. Bara Caws combined this local operation with subject-matter which highlighted the abuse of ordinary people by the market system. The company's many satirical interpretations of the politics of the time focused on the corruption of communitarian ideals by institutions and individuals, all of whom were lampooned without mercy; but the company's most important statements of its political stance in its early works came in the form of history plays which described the injustices faced by workers in the local industries of north Wales. Of these, the two most important were *Bargen*, which concerned itself with the quarrymen's struggles at the time of the great strike of 1903-4, and *Hwyliau'n Codi*, which took a critical view of the exploitation of seamen by their shipmasters during the nineteenth century.

Similarly, Theatr Gorllewin Morgannwg's signature work for adult audiences between 1986 and 1990 relied on a clear, simple narrative outlining a community's struggle against corporate power, and was similar to much of Bara Caws's output in its cheap and cheerful flexibility of staging, which was based largely on the actors' ingenuity and persuasiveness. However, in Morgannwg's work – ostensibly influenced by the theatre of Dario Fo – the boldly committed narrative premiss of each show was belied by the frequent use of fantasy sequences as a means of resolving the problems outlined. For example, in *Gwartheg Gwyllt... a Saeson* ('Mad Cows and Englishmen') a community blighted by the nuisance of low-flying aircraft takes matters into its own hands when a



Hwyliau'n Codi,
Theatr Bara Caws
(*photograph*
courtesy Theatr
Bara Caws)

group of locals assemble their own 'aircraft' out of spare parts and take to the sky in defiance of the RAF. In production, this comic highlight delighted audiences, as, no doubt, did the lesson in taking collective action; but its departure from reality was such that it reversed the inherent political dynamic of the show – the locals' powerlessness, exemplified in the body of their shambolic plane, became the object of the comedy rather than its subject; and the question of how to take real political action in defiance of the authorities dissolved in the midst of the audience's laughter. Theatr Gorllewin Morgannwg's evocation of Fo and his truly committed Marxist analysis of contemporary events was evidence of the advance of Thatcherism, in that Fo's techniques provided the basic style for their work, rather than its political substance.

In many ways, the same was true of Bara Caws by the end of the 1980s. Bara Caws's bold declarations early in that decade, identifying them as a company committed to socialist principles, became conspicuous by their rarity, and a baseline populism and non-aligned communitarian spirit took over. As Thatcherism expanded, theatre's inconsequentiality against the very real forces it was trying to oppose was cruelly exposed, and Bara Caws's resultant – almost nihilistic – recourse to irony and satire became increasingly punishing for audiences. As the 1980s progressed, it became ever more evident that naming and identifying causes to support was no longer effective political action. The political consciousness of a whole society was being eroded.

A contrasting pattern of playful, politically committed innovation followed by a protracted battle against the forces of Thatcherism was seen in the work of Cwmni Cyfri Tri and Brith Gof. As mentioned above, these

companies shared many of the same early influences, including the work of Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (much of which was created by the founder members of Brith Gof), the Teatr-Laboratorium of Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret. Both companies were committed to innovative work derived from multiple sources – physical techniques, music, scenographic devices and texts – and both attempted to appeal to a wider audience by relating their experiments with theatrical form to a specifically Welsh cultural context. Quite soon, however, their paths began to diverge, with Cyfri Tri turning to rather more populist forms and sources while maintaining an almost bewilderingly broad brief (the company created community-based work, theatre in education, theatre for young audiences and youth theatre, as well as a number of shows which adhered more or less to its early principles) until, in 1989, it became amalgamated with Theatr Crwban and redesignated itself as a theatre for young audiences. Under this guise, it managed to maintain much of its commitment to diverse forms of theatre practice, but the company's social profile among adult audiences was compromised.

Brith Gof, on the other hand, changed course dramatically at the end of the 1980s, drastically revising the nature of its output by abandoning the creation of single works which contained a direct reference to the Welsh cultural tradition, and turning instead to an elongated project consisting of 'radically unfinished' pieces, which commenced with *The Disasters of War* (1988), and was followed by *Pax* (1990) and *Arturius Rex* (1993). These changes came in response to a changed economic and social climate under Thatcherism, which the company felt was in danger of compromising its operation, and so it sought a more radical theatrical aesthetic with which to arm its audience against the vicissitudes of the age. Coupled with a move from its original base in Aberystwyth to Cardiff, this change brought Brith Gof's work to a new, urban, English-speaking audience; but in the opinion of many, it also broke the company's contract with the largely Welsh-speaking audience which had backed its early work. Although the company retained the support of a number of people who had admired it from the very beginning, the problems resulting from this break were revisited

Brith Gof
Haearn
(Tredegar 1992)
© Pete Telfer



upon Brith Gof time and time again during the 1990s. The company found that its attempt to maintain its creative momentum and encourage a challenging attitude to contemporary culture and politics was at odds with the need to foster and maintain an audience for its work by creating an identifiable, saleable product; and by the end of the decade, pressures to change the Arts Council funding arrangements for theatre meant that the creation of 'product' was given ever-increasing priority. It could be argued that, by disengaging itself from a stable host community, Brith Gof ultimately weakened the popular case for its own survival.

Twenty years on from the instigation of this dispersed, Taliesinic national theatre, it can now be seen that Thatcherism itself was part of an even larger project, that of globalization, which resulted in market forces, rather than social cohesion or consensus, becoming accepted as the dominant energy and determinant of success almost everywhere. By the same token, the history of Welsh-language theatre between 1979 and 1997 constitutes an argument against an uncritical acceptance of the logic of globalization, and of the further commodification of theatre into 'cultural product'. In this respect, a critical reconsideration of this period is all the more timely, as more recent developments in Welsh-language theatre might leave it to be regarded as something of a trough between two institutionalized – perhaps 'Taliescentic'? – peaks; the former being the building of the 'university' mainstage theatres and the creation of Cwmni Theatr Cymru during the 1960s and 1970s, the latter being the launching of the new national company, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, in 2004. The necessary role of that company in reanimating the Welsh theatre scene, as well as its institutional backing and level of funding, seems to demand that its projected brand of mainstage theatre be given pride of place in any future historical survey of theatrical activity in the Welsh language, thus leaving the period between the demise of Cwmni Theatr Cymru and its own inception as a period of confusion, a brief 'dark age' without an overriding or coherent brief. My hope is that *Ar Wasgar* sheds some light into this darkness, and begins to reveal the years between 1979 and 1997 as a period of considerable importance both in terms of the standards achieved by some companies and of the exemplary cultural action and identity which theatre offered at this time.

'A massive challenge to re-build an audience that has become dormant'

Lisa Lewis interviews Lyn T. Jones

Lyn T. Jones, Chair of the Board of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, talks to Lisa Lewis about the newly established national Welsh-language touring company.

Lisa Lewis: There have been many debates about the notion of a Welsh-language National Theatre of Wales. Some have argued that a National Theatre couldn't possibly exist in Wales in the same way that it does in other countries, and that the very concept of a national theatre would not combine well with the infrastructure of small-scale, touring companies that we have in Wales. Others have argued that the venture has been tried and tested, and that it has to some extent failed, for various reasons. What is different about this latest bid to create a national theatre for Wales – Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru?

Lyn T. Jones: A 'national' theatre will exist in Wales in its own guise and its own form, and any attempt to make it a clone of any other 'national' theatre would be to commit it to abject failure. It should certainly look at all the different models and take from them the elements that suit Wales best. In essence, it has to be a 'national' theatre of and for its people. If it does not serve this purpose it becomes an artistic irrelevance, an exercise in one art form purely for its own pleasure.

The formation of a Welsh-language 'national' theatre will create for the very first time a theatrical structure that will allow practitioners to develop their craft on a larger scale than before. For the first time in years it will allow writers to create plays with considerably more than three characters, and it will provide directors with the opportunity to create visual pieces from these works using a broader brush and a wider canvas. Most important of all, it will allow audiences throughout Wales to experience a far wider range of theatre, from Welsh-language drama to adaptations from other languages and new writing.

Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru will always be dependent on the existing small-scale touring companies, as it is from this grassroots base that the Company will find the source of new talent, not by creaming off that talent, but by ensuring that performers, designers, directors, stage managers, administrators and directors are given the opportunity to work on a different scale for both short and long periods.

Previous attempts to set up a national theatre have only partially succeeded because, in the early days, it was a concept imposed on a purely amateur theatre electorate, in a theatre scene devoid of small-scale touring companies. When the early version of these companies came into existence, not enough money was available to fund them, and more than one of those companies went under as a result. Later attempts at creating a healthy middle-scale theatre were also hamstrung by limited funding.

2004 can give a better start to a Welsh national theatre, partly because the existence of the National Assembly has given confidence and encouragement to the people of Wales to seek and find their own 'voice' in all areas. In addition, the recent restructuring and refocusing which has taken place within the Arts Council of Wales has encouraged groups to approach theatre in a far more holistic way. The general public have welcomed the establishment of a Welsh-language national theatre with great anticipation.

Lisa Lewis: Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru is a theatre company created primarily to serve the Welsh-speaking audiences of Wales. What might its appeal be to those who do not speak the Welsh language? If it is to be a theatre for all the people of Wales, then surely it has a responsibility to develop a special relationship with those who do not speak Welsh but who might be interested in the artistic venture. Are there any strategies in place to develop such an audience?

Lyn T. Jones: I believe that extending a warm welcome to a new audience is absolutely essential. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru cannot exist with the support of its core audience alone (which is perceived to be in the older age bracket). A high percentage of that audience will almost certainly be there, but in contemporary twenty-first century Wales, there has to be a conscious targeting of that fast-growing group – Welsh-language learners. It is our intention and our duty to prepare adequate programme notes that will assist the learner in following what happens on stage. The theatre-loving non-Welsh speaker is similarly included in our target audience. Each one of us, I am sure, has at some point watched – and enjoyed – a film performed in a language we do not understand, with the assistance of subtitling. We have taken pleasure from experiencing the story, from the acting talent shown, and the directorial skills involved. With the new technology available, it is practical to offer subtitling as an option in the theatre context, and Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru will certainly take advantage of any and every technological development that will help audiences derive greater pleasure from our performances. Use will also be made of the internet to give background information on the work of the company.

Lisa Lewis: Terry Hands, director of Clwyd Theatr Cymru, last year posed the question: ‘What was, or could be a national theatre in a country with neither a mainstream tradition or a producing house infrastructure?’ (*The Western Mail*, 4 July 2003). His definition, based on the theatre of other countries, is that a nation needs ‘flagships for quality’ and ‘homes for audience development’. He also states that ‘touring as a *raison d’être* is largely a management concept and like most management concepts... leads to less art and more management.’ He is talking, of course, about the development of Clwyd Theatr Cymru. But what will the role of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru be? Will it be a flagship company? Will it tour? And how does it hope to develop its audience?

Lyn T. Jones: Terry Hands is offering us his definition of a National Theatre based on his experience internationally and with national companies in England. I have no problems with his definition in that area of experience. However, from the Welsh-language standpoint, his concept is not only unsustainable, but also impractical, since the core audience for Welsh-language drama is spread around the country. There is no specific region that can be regarded as a potentially permanent venue for ‘audience development’. In fact, all the main stages around Wales become the permanent venues in Welsh-language terms. They will become our ‘homes’ for each production, and for each production, the stages in Theatr Gwynedd, Theatr Clwyd, Theatr y Sherman, Theatr y Grand, Theatr y Werin, and Theatr y Torch become our ‘national’ theatre. We will work tirelessly with these venues in the area of developing audiences not only for our productions, but all Welsh-language productions, and will strive to encourage audiences to enjoy every available kind of theatre. It is possible that in English-language terms ‘touring as a *raison d’être* is largely a management concept’, but in a Welsh-language context, touring theatre is the only possible national solution in the early twenty-first century. Our national theatre belongs to all the people of Wales, and we owe it to each other to ensure that our productions are seen in venues within reasonable travelling distances. This we aim to achieve.

Lisa Lewis: The company is to be based in Carmarthenshire. This came as a shock to some people, who expected the company to be based in the capital. Others expected the venture to be based in North Wales. Why Carmarthenshire?

Lyn T. Jones: Why not Carmarthenshire? It is a county with a high percentage of Welsh speakers – an important factor in the decision-making process of finding a home for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru. The capital was not an essential option, since it was not going to be a building-based company. The brief is to take high quality productions to

mainstream theatres throughout Wales, and to that extent, the location became a secondary factor. As we were seeking partnerships for the future, Local Authorities were approached by the Board and invited to consider helping the Company to 'set up home'. A number of Local Authorities showed an interest, and after a series of presentations and considerable discussion, Carmarthenshire was chosen, and it was decided that the former Millennium Coastal Path building in the North Dock area of Llanelli would become its temporary home. Its permanent home will be developed in partnership with the Local Authority and others over the coming three or four years.

Lisa Lewis: Many 'national' theatre companies throughout the world have an associated youth theatre group/company. Will this kind of activity be part of the brief for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru?

Lyn T. Jones: Some of the existing youth theatre companies have already approached us to request advice and support for the work that they do. Advice and support will be freely available to youth and young people's theatre groups, as it will be for educational establishments involved in theatrical activities. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru has a specific role to play within the structure of Welsh-language theatre, and fulfilling the role of a national touring production company to the highest standard possible has to be the main aim.

Lisa Lewis: Will the company forge relationships with schools, colleges and universities? Will it have an educational aspect?

Lyn T. Jones: One of the first appointments to be made by the new management team will be that of an Education Programme Director. This person will be responsible for the preparation of education packs to accompany all the productions undertaken by the company. The Education Programme Director will also be responsible for the Education section on Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru's proposed website, so that students of all levels can access the website and benefit from all the information to be found there. Initial discussions with a number of educational establishments have already taken place, and these will be further developed and extended over the early years of the company's existence. As the company visits each theatre in different parts of Wales, workshops on that specific production will be arranged for/with schools, adult groups and societies in each catchment area. The educational and training aspect will be central to the development of the company.

Lisa Lewis: There are many different models for a theatre company. Some companies are purely co-operative, and work as an ensemble. Others are

director-led, and sometimes employ a hierarchical structure. There are all kinds of permutations in between. Which model will be adopted by Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru?

Lyn T. Jones: It is impossible to define a particular kind of model that will be Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru. I suspect that it will form and define its own model as years go by, but in the short term it has to be director-led in terms of the programme. In the first few seasons, there will have to be more emphasis on existing writing, from Welsh-language drama to adaptations from English and other languages, and possibly a new text. Commissioning is a long process, and any writing commissioned now will not see the light of day for at least two and a half years. Co-operation between Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru and Sgript Cymru is important, since this is the potential cradle for not only new writing but also new writers.

*Cefin Roberts
(photograph by
Keith Morris,
courtesy Theatr
Genedlaethol
Cymru)*



Lisa Lewis: Could you provide an overview of the company structure, and in particular, could you tell us about the Artistic Director, Cefin Roberts? He is a highly successful director of youth theatre and an experienced practitioner who runs his own theatre school in North Wales. What particular vision does he bring to Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru?

Lyn T. Jones: There is scepticism, even a derogatory tone inherent in this question. Cefin Roberts has a track record that is outstanding in whichever way you care to measure his contribution to theatre in Wales. May I remind you that he started as a young actor in the days of Cwmni Theatr Cymru, and was one of the founding members of Theatr Antur, which was set up in order to facilitate the writing, directing and touring of a different kind of production. This later led to the formation of Cwmni Theatr Bara Caws, again with Cefin Roberts as one of its founder members. Within that organisation he directed, wrote and performed in numerous successful productions. His contribution as an actor and performer on a wider stage continued with appearances in many television and stage drama productions. He is also, of course, a singer/performer in his own right. Cefin believed that the quality of theatre training in Wales was, on the whole, unsatisfactory, with voice training, movement and focus on the spoken word, particularly in the Welsh language, conspicuous by its absence. This led him to establish

Ysgol Glanaethwy as an educational theatre establishment that focused on all these missing elements. To imply that this was ‘just youth theatre’ is to miss the central thrust of what he was setting out to achieve.

The vision that the Artistic Director brings to Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru is one based on high quality productions, an open audition philosophy that allows all members of the acting fraternity to strive for roles in each production, high standards of presentation and a programme that will not only attract, but challenge audiences. The structure of the company in its early days is a simple one, with a team of four forming the management side of the company: the Artistic Director, the General Manager, the Marketing Director, and the Production Manager.

Lisa Lewis: What kind of theatre will Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru create? Is it its mission to stage classical Welsh-language plays? And how will it support new writing?

Lyn T. Jones: Essentially, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru will create quality, exciting, entertaining and challenging productions for its audience. It has a massive challenge to rebuild an audience that has become in many ways dormant over the last decade or more. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, like any mainstream theatre company, cannot survive on audiences of sixty a night, therefore its brief is to rekindle interest and sustain and build audiences. It most certainly carries a mission to stage classical Welsh-language plays, but there has to be an acceptance that there is a limited pool of available texts. Therefore, the brief is to bring high quality, high standard theatre productions in the Welsh language to as wide an audience as possible. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru will give complete support to new writing, in that it will promote new texts by



*Cefin Roberts
auditions young
actors for Theatr
Genedlaethol
Cymru
(photograph by
Keith Morris,
courtesy Theatr
Genedlaethol
Cymru)*

publishing them as the company stages them. It will certainly encourage new writers to write for the stage, and wherever and whenever possible will support writing courses that will develop new writers and new writing. Again, as previously mentioned, the process of commissioning new drama is a slow process, and the first commissioned play will not be seen for at least two seasons, although new writing is likely to appear in the very first season.

Lisa Lewis: What can we expect to see in the first season/year of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru?

Lyn T. Jones: The company's first production will be seen on the main stages of Wales in April and May of this year, and will be a play by a contemporary Welsh dramatist, reworked especially for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru's premiere. The first season will include a translation of a Shakespeare classic, a play with music to open 2004, and probably an original comedy or farce at the end of the first full season, a year this spring.

Theatr Genedlaethol will be touring with Meic Povey's *Yn Debyg Iawn i Ti a Fi* between 22 April and 29 May. First performed by Theatr Bara Caws in 1995, it has been updated for this tour. Plans for subsequent seasons include another touring production, *Romeo a Juliet*, between 4 October and 13 November.

Lisa Lewis is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Media Drama at the University of Glamorgan.

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So what's this National Theatre debate?

David Adams

Amidst discussions about the value and scope of the newly established Welsh-language national theatre company, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, debates about the need for an English-language National Theatre for Wales have recently been rekindled. David Adams summarises the key issues involved and questions the value of a such a National Theatre.

It might have been the cold panic that gripped us when we realised that all that lay ahead for weeks was a seemingly unending series of pantos and mindless kids' shows, but the end of last year saw a flurry of concern about the state of the theatre in Wales: a familiar topic whenever two or more practitioners are gathered together, but one that had taken on a new urgency. Possibly the reason for this was a major conference, predictably entitled *The Future of Theatre*, organised by the Wales Association for the Performing Arts in Cardiff at the beginning of December – a much relished opportunity for people to congregate and whinge. Or maybe it was that, shortly before this, whether by chance or intent, the Welsh Arts Council Chair, Geraint Talfan Davies, had floated the possibility of money to establish a new large-scale building-based production company in South Wales but outside Cardiff: such an enigmatic proposal – possibly designed to soothe the savage breasts already being beaten in advance of the WAPA conference – merely irked further, since it either meant support for Michael Bogdanov's Swansea-based fledgling Welsh Theatre Company or was utter pie-in-the-sky, and in any case meant precious funds going towards the one thing most people would agree was not needed.

And at around the same time, the National Assembly was again dabbling in matters it knew nothing about and hearing those with vested interests make presentations about theatre writing in Wales – or, rather, the lack of it. The Lib Dems, forever ignorant of the subtleties of the arts, inevitably called again for an English-language national theatre company as the answer.

And certainly not by coincidence, a new campaign was launched called *State of Play*, with playwrights justifiably complaining that there wasn't enough new writing commissioned.

So yet again we sat and pondered: how the hell did we get here, when a couple of decades ago Welsh performance was exciting, adventurous and ambitious?

Maybe for those that speak Welsh things are somewhat cheerier, as Lyn T. Jones asserts in this issue of *New Welsh Review*. But for the rest of us, and those Welsh speakers who are concerned about the state of theatre

generally in Wales, just as we sense that the twenty-first century is really getting going, all we have is the old debate about a National Theatre.

So here are a few questions and answers on the theme of *Why a National Theatre?* And, of course, since it is a clichéd argument and we are dealing in stereotypes, we have to begin at the beginning...

What is theatre for?

This is not a trick question. Professional theatre (and that's what we're talking about) is an expensive business. It has never paid its way, relying always on patronage. So the National Assembly, today's patron of the arts through its distribution agency, the Welsh Arts Council, and cash-strapped local councils, has to justify expenditure on theatre just as it does on health, education, roads, housing and so on. And when we say 'it' we mean 'we': our taxes. What, after all, is the function of theatre? Wherein lies the public good? Why should millions of pounds of public money be spent on theatre? Who benefits? It is easy to see why young people's theatre is A Good Thing, not so easy to say why a woman dressed as a man leaping about in front of a video camera while retelling the plot of an old American gangster movie to loud music (Eddie Ladd's *Scarface*, possibly the most significant piece of theatre to have come out of Wales in the last five years) is valuable. Ask your local AM.

What does it cost, then?

It has become almost impossible to work out just what public money is spent on theatre. But Arts Council sources suggest that while a few years ago its drama budget was just over £3 million, today it's nearly doubled to around £5.7m – good news, you might think, except that, bizarrely, there are fewer companies and less new work than ever. The new money has gone mainly to Mold's Clwyd Theatr Cymru (CTC), who got around £1.4m last year, to the embryo Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru (TGC) and to bolstering the young people's theatre network that had been threatened by the old, bad Arts Council mandarins. Wales's most critically successful company with an international reputation, Volcano Theatre, got somewhat over £120,000 by dint of holding the so-called 'experimental theatre' franchise.

Who decides what theatre we see?

Obviously, those who hold the purse strings. This used to be principally the Arts Council, a government quango, but the Assembly has increasingly leant on it to conform to Assembly cultural policy. Devolution happened to coincide with a disastrous period in the Arts Council's history as it tried to enforce an unpopular new drama strategy and bungled it, playing into the hands of the newly-powerful politicians who wanted to control everything. The Arts Council today is mainly staffed not by professionals interested in the arts but by bureaucrats often recruited from local government, and it has

been reorganised on a geographical basis: drama matters are overseen by an officer in the North Wales office. The lay advisory panels have been scrapped. Companies have to jump through various hoops that have little to do with art. The theatre we get is decided mainly by people who have little interest in theatre but like to see boxes ticked.

What's wrong with current provision?

Basically, it's there to support the status quo. By far the biggest Arts Council grant goes to Clwyd Theatr Cymru, currently around 27% of the total. Young people's theatre, currently provided by eight companies, now reinstated as the sacred cow of Welsh Theatre, is (according to Geraint Talfan Davies) to get 40% of the total drama expenditure, and Lyn T. Jones's Welsh-language national theatre company, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, will get 20%. Which comes to, er, 87%, leaving us wondering where the money for the three building-based companies in Cardiff, Bangor and Milford Haven, Volcano, Hijinx and Sgript Cymru – not to mention the proposed new mainstream production company – is coming from. And, crucially, there isn't enough money for new projects or new writing – the lifeblood of any theatre.

Is there such a thing as 'Welsh theatre' or is it just 'theatre in Wales'?

Clwyd Theatr Cymru likes to think of itself as the National Theatre of Wales in all but name and enjoys the status of a National Performing Arts Company (along with Diversions, BBCNOW, the WNO and, presumably, the new Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru), but most of the profession doesn't see it as such – it has a Welsh actor base but does very little new or classic Welsh drama, and its audience is still drawn mainly from over the border. But that doesn't mean there isn't such a thing as Welsh theatre.

Wales may be a small country, but it still has up to fifty theatre companies and individual performers. It is also a nation with a discrete culture, more easily defined than, say, a UK region like Yorkshire and Humberside (with which it can be compared in terms of size and arts activity). And that difference is enhanced by the fact that its relatively recent cultural history was determined by its relationship with England and the UK. I can't think of a more accurate term than cultural colonialism, but whatever terminology one chooses to use, it was this cultural experience that made the performance work which developed once the arts in Wales were separately funded (from the 1960s) distinctly different. Without that post-colonial legacy we simply would not have had Brith Gof, Eddie Ladd, Gareth Miles, Marc Rees, Ian Rowlands or Ed Thomas, for example. This, along with the work of Sgript Cymru, Hijinx, the young people's theatre companies and Volcano, clearly makes up something called 'Welsh theatre'.

What's the point of a National Theatre?

The notion that the diverse and discrete small-scale work that has defined Welsh theatre in effect constitutes the 'national theatre of Wales' is a truism that's been around since Janek Alexander asserted it in his *Export Wales* treatise in 1991. But a National Theatre project (with capital letters) has been around for a century or so, and usually it's coincided with political expediency: when the Home Rule issue was high on the agenda in Lloyd George's day, with the revival of *eisteddfodau*, and around the First World War, under the patronage of English convert Lord Howard de Walden. It emerged again in the 1930s thanks to the dynamism of Saunders Lewis and the founding of Plaid Cymru, and again in the 1960s with another resurgence in nationalism and more lately in the 1990s as devolution beckoned. In other words, it was tied to the nationalist cause and, apart from Michael Bogdanov's recent campaign, had little to do with the needs of theatre practice in Wales.

And what's different now?

The National Assembly seems to have espoused the idea as a familiar device for legitimising a new nation through the creation of national institutions. Few see that as a proper reason for channelling a huge amount of resources into one company – and diverting us from the real concerns of what is still a fledgling theatre provision where both the practice and audiences need nurturing and developing. But what's different is that the Assembly's cultural policy is meant to drive Arts Council decisions, and it's a policy based on a philistine emphasis on so-called accessibility, where uncomfortable matters like critical judgement, the value of the arts and the needs of creative individuals and groups are alien concepts.

So why a National Theatre?

Because it sounds good? Because it fits in with Assembly politics? Because it avoids thinking about theatre as an art form, as a practice, as a profession? Because it makes life easier for the decision-makers? Because it can create status without any test of quality? Because it pretends that Wales has an established English-language theatre tradition? Because Terry Hands would like to be it? Take your pick.

So an English-language national theatre company is inevitable?

Actually, no. At the end of the day, the people who produce theatre will probably make a better case to the Arts Council than will the politicians, nationalists and self-interested personalities. If the problems of Welsh theatre practice and provision are to be tackled, the answer is unlikely to lie in an English equivalent of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru.

3rd Annual Theatre in Wales Awards

There were eight categories of awards this year, and the winners were selected by visitors to www.theatre-wales.co.uk, the leading internet resource for news, information, reviews and comment on performance in Wales.

The results are as follows:

- **Best English-Language Production:**
Of Mice and Men, directed by Peter Doran at the Torch Theatre, Milford Haven
- **Best Welsh-Language Production:**
Amdani, directed by Elen Bowman for Sgript Cymru, at the Sherman Theatre and then on tour
- **Best New Writing:**
peeling, by Kaite O'Reilly, for Graeae Theatre Company
- **Best Dance or Performance Work:**
I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down, by Earthfall Dance, Cardiff
- **Best Design:**
Frida and Diego, National Youth Theatre of Wales, design team led by Robin Husband
- **Best Male Performer:**
Stephen Marzella as Eddie Carbone in *A View From The Bridge*, Clwyd Theatr Cymru
- **Best Female Performer:**
Eiry Thomas, for her role as Gwyneth in Sgript Cymru's production *Indian Country*, directed by Simon Harris, written by Meic Povey
- **The James Westaway Award:**
Siôn Pritchard, for his role as Mos in Sgript Cymru's production *Indian Country*, directed by Simon Harris, written by Meic Povey



Of Mice and Men, courtesy Torch Theatre

The James Westaway award is sponsored by Parthian Books, Cardigan, Wales's foremost publishers of contemporary drama, in memory of actor James Westaway who died tragically young in 2002.

Each of the winners will receive a cheque for £150 donated by the Department of Film Theatre and Television, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. They will also receive a special handmade glass trophy designed by Siân Lyle.

The Theatre in Wales awards also receive financial support from New Welsh Review and from Aberystwyth Arts Centre. The awards are organised and administered by Red Snapper Web Designs.

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