



theatre in wales

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*Phil Mackenzie
and Josh Green on the
Sherman Youth Theatre's*
Frankensteins

*Kate Frost looks
back on*
NYTW's
*development over
three decades*

Sera Moore Williams
*reflects on her work
with Arad Goch*

Whispers in the Woods
National Youth Theatre of Wales
(Original artwork designed by
James North)

Editors: Francesca Rhydderch & Heike Roms

Tomorrow's Stars

The National Youth Theatre of Wales

Kate Frost

The publicity shots kept in the archives of the National Youth Theatre of Wales must look like a pictorial *Who's Who* of contemporary theatre, film and TV. During the last 28 years, the NYTW has become a diverse breeding-ground for raw talent both on and off stage, nurtured by the inspiring directors who have taken the company to their hearts and moulded it into the success story that it has become.

The NYTW's very first Artistic Director, Alan Vaughan Williams, has seen a number of his youth theatre graduates flourish as professional actors, but he never thought of the NYTW as merely a training ground for actors. 'I wasn't looking to produce actors... [While] many have become actors in fact, and some of them extremely successful actors – and it's great when that happens – we produced all sorts of people.'

One of those emerging talents was Michael Sheen, now a successful actor with an impressive resumé in theatre and film, including Ridley Scott's latest movie, *Kingdom of Heaven*. Likewise, actor Ian Hughes has worked extensively at the RSC as well as appearing in West End musicals. There are too many notable names to mention; the acting world has its fair share of NYTW graduates. In addition, many talented youngsters found their professional lives leading them in other directions, as writers, producers, designers, presenters and agents. Sgript Cymru's Artistic

Director, Simon Harris, for example, was a member during Williams' time, alongside his friend, the photographer Keith Morris, who manages the award-winning *Theatre in Wales* website. Then there's Sara Evans, journalist for BBC News 24; Rhodri Owen, presenter; Oliver Reynolds, poet. The list is seemingly endless.

More recently, there have been striking new figures, such as Matthew Rhys, who has found success with a run at the RSC in a critically-acclaimed production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and Joanna Page, with her memorable and scene-stealing performance of 'Just Judy' in the British film *Love Actually*.

A common theme emerges from the conversations I've had with past NYTW members: the fact that the youth theatre builds confidence and that it offers a unique opportunity to work professionally with other like-minded young people from all over Wales, whilst at the same time evoking a sense of fun, commitment and passion during the course, as well as cementing friendships that last well past the final curtain call. Matthew Rhys enthusiastically tells me, 'I think the best form of training is doing it – you learn at the same time, are guided and tutored, eased into the experience.'

1976 saw the birth of the National Youth Theatre of Wales, in what was a brave move in the economic climate for the Welsh Education Authorities. Wales had a strong tradition of music: the National Youth Orchestra of Wales was already very much established when the youth theatre was just beginning. Alan Vaughan Williams relished the opportunity to lead the new National Youth Theatre, and the summer of 1976 saw a production of *Oh What a Lovely War* performed by its first members.

'I think somebody who was behind the scheme said that they wanted to create an

overall awareness of the arts in general and of the particular contribution of the theatre to the nation's culture,' he explains. 'I thought that was a good way to look at it.'

For eleven years Williams nurtured the NYTW and its talented youngsters. Each year the youth theatre grew, attracting more committed young people and putting on more productions. Simon Harris, a member from 1979 to 1983, remembers his experience in an entirely positive light: 'Alan was certainly the inspiration behind it (NYTW) at the beginning, and he kept it going for many years through quite difficult times, but I think it was the comprehensiveness of what he was trying to do that was so impressive really, in that he tried to involve people right across the board, from all the counties.'

The Welsh Joint Education Committee took over the responsibility of managing the NYTW in 1990, alongside the much needed support of the LEAs. At the same time, Pauline Crossley became the Expressive Arts Officer for the WJEC, with the aim of 'looking at what it (NYTW) was doing, who it was serving, how it was operating across Wales'. A new Artistic Director, Paul Clements, was soon appointed and as Pauline Crossley says, 'He turned the fortunes, if you like, of the youth theatre, both in terms of what it was delivering artistically and educationally but also financially. There were quite extreme pressures at the time and the local authorities bailed the youth theatre out.'

Each Artistic Director has brought something new to the NYTW, with their individual skills, experiences and artistic ideas. I suggest to Pauline Crossley that this was a way in which the NYTW could continually reinvent itself.

'Paul Clements was Artistic Director for, I think, three or four years and he was very much a text-driven director,' she says.

When Jamie Garven took the helm he was looking for something quite different for the youth theatre; more interested in devising a new kind of theatre for young people that was driven more by the young people themselves and perhaps not focusing exclusively on being set in theatres.'

The one thing the NYTW is not afraid to do is experiment. With each director the youth theatre has taken a new path and built upon past successes to give the most to its young members. Garven's succession as Artistic Director in 1997 certainly ensured that the youth theatre went in a new direction. It was a risk that paid off. *The Western Mail's* reviewer was certainly impressed in 1999: 'Boldness is the friend of the youthful company, enthusiasm its hallmark and a welcome dash of irreverence the spice that hones its cutting edge.'

The first production Garven undertook with NYTW was *Ubu*, written by seventeen-year-old Alfred Jarry, a play he thought particularly suitable for the youth theatre to perform. I ask him what his aims were. 'Artistically it was about creating work you couldn't possibly see anywhere else, in that you're working with a large company of people, and professionally you can only work with a small company, so to use that scale and use the possibilities of creating something unique, I think was, at the time, quite apt for the NYTW.'

Ubu was certainly a change in direction from the crowd-pleasing and relatively safe performances of *Grease* and *Godspell* produced under the direction of Artistic Director Michael Poynor in the late 1980s. As Garven comments on his first play with the youth theatre: 'You could fill it with all sorts of inventiveness, youthful exuberance and artistically unconventional ideas.'

Garven's next step, in 2000, was to bring in Italian-born Firenza Guidi, a performance-creator, director, writer and

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performer, to direct her own adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*. The NYTW members were removed from the safe conventions of traditional theatres and thrown into unpredictable and exciting spaces with Guidi's site-specific productions. *Faust* was performed in the National Library of Wales and Cardiff's National Museum and Gallery. Subsequent productions of *Hamlet* and *Woyzeck* were performed on a specially-created stage set in Aberystwyth.

'I think Firenza's introduction as Guest Director took the youth theatre in a direction that it had never been before, in its then 25-year history,' Pauline Crossley explains. 'She focused on site-specific work but it was also very physical – not negating text or the value of text but working with it very differently.'

'It's fair to say that there have been ups and downs,' she goes on to say. 'At times the NYTW has struggled financially, but with the continued support of the Arts Council of Wales, the Youth Theatre has continued to build an impressive reputation both

nationally and further afield. The limits of what the NYTW can achieve seem limited only by time and money.'

Current Artistic Director Greg Cullen's production of *Frida and Diego* in 2003 saw a massive increase in audiences as well as a 54% increase in young people applying to join the company for summer 2004. Guidi's site-specific work, whilst diversifying the youth theatre and producing exciting and experimental work, limited the amount of people who could see it. Cullen reinstated touring with *Frida and Diego* and took the NYTW back into the theatre. Audience figures for 2003 topped 5000.

'I just think the only limitation is you can't work with enough young people,' Garven tells me. 'If there were the resources you could do it all the year round, do it in different geographic locations – it's education, it's development, it's stimulus, it's new ideas for people.'

One of the challenges the NYTW has faced throughout its 28-year history is marrying the Welsh and English languages

Whispers in the Woods (photograph courtesy NYTW)



effectively, in order to stay true to the everyday reality of life in Wales. Each director has found new ways of working and experimenting with language.

Alan Vaughan Williams found it important to get the balance right with the productions because 'the Welsh speakers would always be in a minority'. The main stage play would be text-based and in English; plays ranged from Shakespeare to Dylan Thomas through to Brecht. Alongside these he would run a Welsh-language play and usually another devised piece. 'I was very careful that the people who were in the Welsh production were not only in the Welsh production,' he says.

For Harris, who came from a non-Welsh speaking background, his time with the NYTW was a unique experience. 'That engagement with other cultures and particularly with the Welsh-speaking culture of Wales was at the time quite a development for me,' he recalls.

There were long discussions when Garven became Artistic Director as to how to work both Welsh and English into the productions. The decision was made to do just one production, like *Ubu* or *Beggars' Opera* but to do an English-language and Welsh-language version. And the result of that? 'It was a step forward,' Pauline Crossley tells me. 'It worked, it was supported, but it was very difficult to work on two shows, large scale and then only doing two English-language shows and two Welsh-language shows. It was unsatisfactory, so then we started to think about how we could work bilingually.'

Guidi's three productions were another step in the right direction, as the very nature of the performances was shaped not only by language but also by physical elements, movement and setting; '... although language was an important part of it,' Pauline Crossley explains. 'It was many

languages if you like, physical languages, as well as English, Welsh, Italian and any number of other languages.'

Garven agrees. 'Language is only a part of it: theatre is about action.' Talking specifically about Guidi's three productions, he says, 'It was bold, adventurous, I suppose, experimental in a certain way, very visual, very physical and totally unique.'

Greg Cullen's first production with the NYTW, *Frida and Diego*, united the youth theatre members in one bilingual production. The reaction from the students themselves, according to Pauline Crossley, was 'unanimously in favour of one group of people working towards one goal.'

Cullen also worked bilingually on this year's production *Whispers in the Woods*. During rehearsals, he told me, 'We will once again be experimenting with bilingualism in performance, and the video projections will become a major component in that. We want to create a show which is uniquely Welsh in that it reflects the languages of its members and how those languages are used in everyday speech.' It's a bold decision but one that seems to have paid off.

'I think it's good that they're moving in an opposite direction,' Garven says of Cullen's leadership. 'Their priorities will be different from mine. It's a good contrast, to go for change, go for a different feel.'

Although acting is naturally a major part of the youth theatre, the Artistic Directors have been united in their aim to offer youth theatre members so much more. Williams often offered his students the opportunity to work on a devised piece alongside the main text-based play and Welsh-language production. This side to the youth theatre particularly intrigued Simon Harris, who says that 'it was one of the ways in which I was exposed to writing

at an early stage and it was an opportunity to work with other people, to exchange ideas and to get something done.'

Harris has come full circle, as Sgript Cymru, in conjunction with the NYTW, has set up a web-based project, *Livewire*, 'which involves us paying professional playwrights to work with groups of young people across Wales and to build up a relationship, to encourage them to write a play.'

When I suggest that such diversification bodes well for the future of NYTW, Harris agrees. 'That's part of Greg's mission, having been a playwright himself. He's keen to see young people take more ownership of the project they're working on, and that will inevitably involve some devising and writing.'

And, as I discovered, Cullen is thinking exactly along those lines for summer 2005. 'This year we have sought to develop playwriting with Sgript Cymru,' he says. 'I want to develop scriptwriting next year with a view to producing a play which has been written by young people to a standard of real excellence.'

This is just one example of how NYTW will continue to grow and develop while still offering its students unique opportunities to develop new skills. Everyone involved with NYTW has big ideas for the future. As Greg Cullen puts it so well, 'We are a modern nation, and our national companies should be embracing who and what we are in relation to the world. *Frida and Diego* was about two revolutionary Mexican painters who used their art to redefine a nation and themselves as individuals within it. *Whispers* draws on storytelling traditions from around the world whilst bearing down upon the petty prejudices which prevent us from exploring what it means to be human, alive, in Wales, now.'

Drama graduate Kate Frost is currently working on her first novel.

What makes a monster?

The creation of *frankensteins*
Phil Mackenzie

The Sherman Theatre Summer School was established in 1988, and has since put on a production almost every year. Groups of young people aged 10-25 visit the theatre for an intensive five-week period of rehearsals each summer, which culminate in a dynamic production.

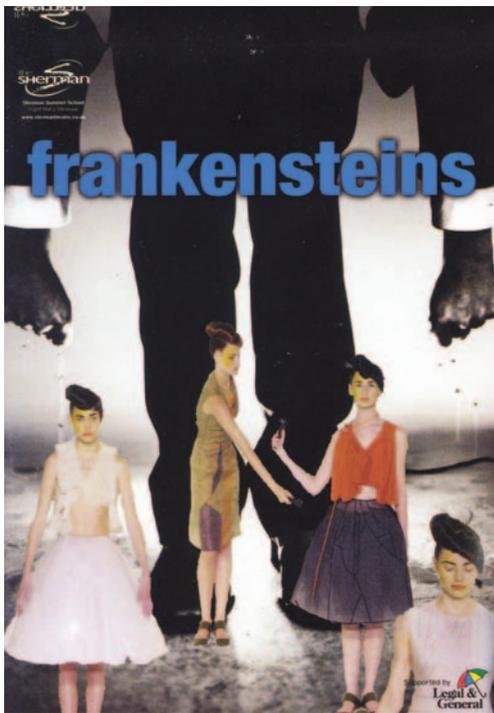
Over the years, the Summer School has worked with professional actors and writers, produced previously written works and devised their own shows, incorporated film, animation, dance, singing and music, all under the direction of an experienced, professional director (currently Phil MacKenzie). Past productions have included *Baroque and Roll*, *Gregory's Girl*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Jungle Book*.

New Welsh Review asked Phil Mackenzie to write about the creation of this year's production, *frankensteins*.

December 2003

Chelyabinsk, Siberia.

It's late afternoon and already dark. I am standing on the edge of Revolution Square. Big Russians in thick coats pass by, laden with makeshift shopping bags on their way home. On top of one of the empty office blocks a large projection screen is pumping out endless video loops: a mix of Bacardi, car and shampoo commercials. A fiction of perfect teeth and smiling people living in a world of emerald oceans, happy families and shining yachts. The stooped shoulders in fur coats stop and watch. Then they go home.



All images accompanying this piece and the review that follows courtesy the Sherman Theatre.

What do they think, looking up at these images? Moscow is a lot of dollars away. What did Dr Frankenstein's 'monster' feel looking in on the 'other' world that he could never be part of? What happens when what created you, rejects you? How come so many people have plastic surgery? How come Michael Jackson keeps changing his face and he can buy anything he wants? What sort of monster is that? How do young people in the West deal with the endless carnival of 'virtual' utopias bombarding them every day? Do they notice anymore?

May 2004

Cardiff

Auditions for 'monsters'. I have asked each young person to bring two pieces of text including one they have written themselves. We do simple movement and group work and combine that with the texts. From the 60 who come I choose 23.

June 2004

La Maison Verte, Southern France

A week with Ron (Bunzl), my assistant director/film-maker for the production. We take inspiration from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the film versions by James Whale and Kenneth Branagh. We also look

at short stories and essays by social, psychological and literary analysts, and science fiction writers. How might we make a piece of contemporary theatre that bridges the gap between the Gothic novel written in 1816 and the concerns and experiences of young people living in today's world of technology and virtual realities?

We part armed with a network of images, questions, actions and situations, each recorded onto their own little white card. Someone asks me what my 'method' is. The method is actually no method; it's more like an intuitive/abstract search engine. It discovers and generates a vocabulary and structure by repeating itself over and over. Each time it is repeated it layers itself with more information and discoveries, so that what is being created reveals itself out of itself and not from me... I just turn the engine on.

July 2004

Think about June 2004.

Visit Mike Ashcroft (my other assistant director). I taught Mike 14 years ago, and so began our ongoing collaboration; he now works closely with the RSC. We speak of the 'monster' inside us all. Mike seems to have a fixation with *Thriller* and Michael Jackson as the ultimate horror of a human seeking perfection.

August 2004

The Sherman Theatre Cardiff

Rehearsal Day 1. 23 'monsters' (11-25 yrs) waiting, talking, nervous and ready to start. I've been a theatre maker for 25 years; the first day of rehearsal still terrifies me. What am I going to do? How to start? Why didn't I prepare more? What is going to work with this group now? Always starting with a blank page – map vague and destination unknown. In a moment of weakness I think, 'Why didn't I choose a play? Why not let somebody else do all the work on

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structure, content and character?’ But where are the plays for such a large cast of young people? A play that doesn’t revolve around 4 or 5 main characters with everybody else as chorus?

How do we start?

We watch two films of *Frankenstein* (Whale and Branagh). Only one person has read the book; for most this is their introduction to the material. With the continual mantra that we are not remaking *Frankenstein*: this is merely our starting point, starting point, starting point, starting point.

Creation of ensemble

An empty clean room blacked out and lit in each corner. Keeping the ‘outside’ world as far away as possible. Mobile phones off, shoes off, loose clothing, no gum, total attention, poised and ready.

Gradually we build a unified group that is capable of creating its own material – establishing the frames and conditions that enable them to experience the act of making something together; the creative efforts of a group of people in a particular time and space, creating something which cannot be predicted in advance. Engaging them in the ‘actions of doing’ rather than ‘acting’. How does what that person/group of people are doing give me something to do (now)? What activates the ‘doing’ is RESPONSE to what else is happening in the room. If in doubt, STOP and LOOK for details, something you like, something that interests you, something that embarrasses you. Take a risk, use other people’s actions, invitations, provocations as triggers and impulses from which to respond and contribute. It is by engaging with others that we find out a little more about ourselves. It’s not for one’s own private pleasure in a corner somewhere.

Process

Each day becomes a series of extended improvisations. Each day this empty box, this *tabula rasa* is filled with a new group experience that is guided by a live mixed soundscape and each person’s choices. Each day a search for something else and things remembered. Each day beginning with the simplest of impulses – a question, an action, a song, a walk, a stillness, a position, a tableau, an unexpected event, an embrace, a fall, a change of tempo. All the time seeking to use every person’s creativity inside a developing performance language.

At the end of each day, a discussion and reflection upon what we have done, identifying events worth pursuing. An ongoing investigation into what we are trying to do, coming from what we have just done – always referring back to the source material of *Frankenstein*.

August passes (very) quickly.

In the course of these four weeks the content mutates and multiplies, and what we are making with each other gradually reveals itself. Soon I must start to simplify and clarify, organize and edit. As always, I put it off as long as possible. So much material – how do we do justice to it?

What’s the story?

It’s an elusive Zen secret, how to capture and store the ‘magic’ of these improvisations – those moments when the ensemble transforms with invention and imagination. If captured too quickly, the ‘magic’ simply disappears. Of course, this ‘magic’ is followed by hours of stumbling, falling, grasping, guessing, missing and occasionally catching.

Stay patient, stay humble: there is time.

Side by side with the theatre-making is the composition of the films to be projected as part of the performance. Ron Bunzl has sat with me for four weeks in the room

constructing *frankensteins*. 'I worked to create movies for the production,' he writes. 'Three screens dominated the stage image. Like a video wall projecting images of desire and icons relating to the themes of *Frankenstein*. Some of the 'movies' were like commercials portraying a perfect world, while others mirrored, echoed and provided context for characters and actions, for example, the *Sims* world that accompanied the opening section of the performance was a combination of the *Sims Hot Date* computer game – in which each player creates and manages characters and situations in a simulation of the real world – together with short movies I made with the young people in which they inhabit 'ideal/dream' worlds of designer furniture, beauty parlours, fitness/body building and high-end automotive technology. Other movies featured 3D animations of perfect and impossible bodies floating through manipulated otherworldly landscapes composed of video images of demolished motor parts. These movies were intended to frame the stage action and introduce levels of visual content based on the themes of desire, creation, destruction, longing and the visualization of virtual/perfected worlds.'

The cast are away filming with Ron in Ferrari showrooms, a scrap yard, a beauty parlour and a furniture store. Mike and I have a day together to thread a story through the blocks of material that have been created. A simple clear red line running through the piece that the audience can hold on to. Dr Frankenstein becomes a hybrid of a vaudeville magician and a psychotic scientist whose laboratory is a little Victorian theatre on wheels. The ensemble, all in white on a white stage, inhabit a strange Stepford-Wives-crossed-with-the-*Sims*-world of automated perfection mutants. All of them craving perfection in the human form. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* dance mutates into a

collective dance of death. Threaded through this is the pathos of the monster looking for his bride. In the tradition of happy endings the monster is united with his bride, the magician's assistant.

Why don't I come up with the story sooner, the thread that tells us what to do next?

Four days before opening we transfer from the comfort and security of our rehearsal room to the brutal reality of a large stage with 468 empty seats facing us. Always the cruellest day. Panic sets in and our young cast is plunged into brief despair. We plough on through with the tedious task of blocking the work onto the stage, at the same time weaving the story into what we have made. Black clouds quickly vanish in these final three days. Suddenly the white canvas of the stage is lit with beautiful lights, there is sound, the films are edited and projected like giant billboards. All those hours of improving and moving and stumbling begin to make sense.

Mike (Ashcroft), who has shared the summer school with me for the last three years, writes: 'What is so refreshing about this summer school, and a lot of this comes down to the way Phil approaches the work, the way he instills in all the young people a total belief in the process. At the end we always end up in a place that we did not expect. So much theatre begins on day one with an idea and the rest of the days are spent trying to get that idea onto the stage as quickly and painlessly as possible.'

The summer school is not like this. It is a real journey into the unknown, a high risk adventure. The greatest thing we always do is to let it take its own direction. Everybody is equal, everybody is a collaborator. This level of commitment and trust takes time. The show stops being about the ideas of the leaders but rather about the stories and ideas of all those taking part. I thought this year was a harder show to make than the previous

two (*Lord of the Flies Revisited* in 2001 and *Alice* in 2002) because of the scale of the issues raised in the book. Maybe a smaller core at the beginning of the process would have helped us identify the heart of the book and which ideas were worth exploring.'

The daily challenge throughout was how to keep 23 young people across a wide age spectrum engaged all of the time. Otherwise they make a lot of noise. We need to create an atmosphere that keeps their attention and interest – that encourages them to grapple with the complex issues that rise from the material. Actually they bring a very astute understanding of the world in which they live to the project. They ask a lot of questions and expect them to be answered. But I wonder if there is an easier way to do all of this? Maybe start with a smaller core of people to explore with and then add more later? Is eight hours of rehearsals each day too long? Could we sustain more performances? Should we do something very different next year? Take over the entire Sherman building, have smaller teams, each with their own director, and create a series of performance installations for the corridors, the dressing rooms, the foyer etc.?

Finally, watching the audience as they watch what these 23 performers have managed to achieve in a month is (as always) deeply moving. Their level of belief and concentration, their sheer joy and style. Thank you to each and every one.

frankensteins was created for the Sherman Theatre Summer School 2004
Performed Sherman Theatre Venue 1 on September 3 & 4
Directed by Phil Mackenzie
Assistant Director/Film-maker: Ron Bunzl
Assistant Director: Mike Ashcroft
Lighting: Kay Harding
Design: William Goad
Costumes: Deryn Tudor

Frankensteins

Sherman Youth Theatre

A review by Josh Green

This latest offering from the Sherman Youth Theatre was a loose updating of the classic *Frankenstein* story to a modern setting. The production took a number of themes that arise in the original novel – principally alienation, the search for acceptance and the fascination with appearance – and drew parallels with issues that are prevalent in our current society and are of particular relevance to the show's target audience of 11-25 year olds (which included me). Add to this the fact that this was a devised piece, giving a certain amount of creative freedom to the young cast, and that it aimed to create and sustain an interaction between live performance and recorded footage (video artist Ron Bunzl collaborated on the project): this production had all the ingredients of an interesting and thought-provoking piece.

I have chosen the word interesting here for a reason. It is a word often attached to pieces of theatre that have not completely fulfilled their potential, where a good idea has not been carried through or communicated fully. And this performance was an example of this. It had strong individual elements but no clear overall structure. This led to a piece of theatre that sprawled, not across the space, which was used effectively, but across its own duration. It lacked the slickness that brings pace, and although the piece had its own energy, this was not enough to hold the attention of the audience throughout.

However, there were parts of the show that I genuinely enjoyed. After a weak and



overly melodramatic beginning, the piece found its feet through a series of well-performed, strongly-stylised movement sequences. The sight of a box breaking free from a formation of identical boxes and moving apparently of its own accord across the stage, being propelled from within by one of the younger actors, was both understated and aesthetically brilliant. At this point, the line between playfulness and experimentation, comedy and horror, was successfully blurred.

It was in this section of the show, too, that the cast clearly showed their ability and also their enjoyment in what they were doing. A sense of excitement radiated from the performers and from the elder members of the cast, a sexual tension that is often present in youth theatre. This seems to be a reaction to the intimacy of the rehearsal environment, which is often misinterpreted as mutual attraction. Here, this sensual energy was harnessed well to portray how sexuality has to be dealt with at an increasingly younger age in our society. For me the sight of very young girls taking part in a dance sequence relating to plastic

surgery was certainly disturbing.

The sense of sexuality was heightened by the fantastically kitsch costumes. White PVC dresses and dyed wigs for the girls and PVC doctors' outfits and black hair for the boys gave the impression of plastic people, moulded into one image. This theme was introduced early in the performance via a video projection of the *Sims* computer game, which allows you to construct your own virtual family. This was the first video clip used on the impressive triple screen which hung at an angle downstage above the performers. However, subsequent clips failed to match the effect of the first one and added little to the live action. This was possibly the first performance using video I have seen where I hardly watched the projections. This is both a compliment to the strength of the on-stage performers, but also an indication that the projections were redundant within the piece. It is in vogue for experimental theatre to use video, and it felt like the video was employed here for mere aesthetic appeal rather than to enhance the themes of the performance. Considering that the

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piece was a collaboration between live performance and video art, the lack of interaction between stage and projections was disappointing.

This disparity emphasised the lack of cohesion apparent throughout the piece. It is admirable that director Phil Mackenzie and his team attempt to give young performers a taste of experimental work, but this needed to be carried through the whole performance. As it went on, the piece abandoned all pretence at being experimental, resulting in two mid-performance rounds of applause from the largely family-based audience. A seemingly improvised spoken section delivered directly to the audience about the state of the female body and our obsession with perfect beauty was laboured, and a version of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video (every performer taking part in the famous choreography and portraying Jackson as the modern Frankenstein's monster) was clichéd at best. These audience-pleasing numbers actually undermined the stronger and considerably more thought-provoking work that had preceded them. And as a member of the target audience I began to feel patronised. Where the earlier elements had dealt subtly with the themes, leaving the audience to come to its own conclusions, the later sections had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Despite these criticisms, however, I would say that *Frankensteins* allowed young people to be part of and have a hand in the creation of a piece of theatre that introduced them to experimental forms, for which Phil Mackenzie should be applauded. The piece attempted too much, which resulted in the lack of a clear structure. But the level of enjoyment the cast were taking in what they had created was a privilege to witness and lent validity to the whole project.

Josh Green is a recent graduate from the Department of Drama at the University of Glamorgan.

'My problem sometimes' Sera Moore Williams

Playwright and director Sera Moore Williams is currently Associate Director of Arad Goch, one of Wales' foremost theatre companies catering for young people. Arad Goch's aim is to create sophisticated, contemporary theatre, primarily for young audiences in Wales; to create links between Wales and other cultures and countries by touring the best of the company's productions abroad and by inviting new work into Wales; and to encourage and instigate new ideas and work for theatre for young audiences through co-operation with other artists, companies and organisations. In this article, Sera Moore Williams reflects on her recent work with young people in Ceredigion.

A music festival, a death in suspicious circumstances, a wrist watch and drug paraphernalia: all these elements feature in *Dead Man's Bong*, a performance devised and performed by a group of young men, and based on the experiences of one of them. As well as telling a gripping story, the performers expressed a variety of (well researched) youthful opinion about the use and abuse of recreational drugs. *Dead Man's Bong* (1999) was my first experience of working with young people who are amongst the least privileged (in so many ways) in Ceredigion. It was the beginning of a strange journey for me as a director, to a place where the final production was only one outcome required of the creative process. Fortunately, by virtue of the fact that we were making theatre, it was almost inevitable that the young men involved found themselves having to address some

basic issues of communication, and gaining basic communication skills.

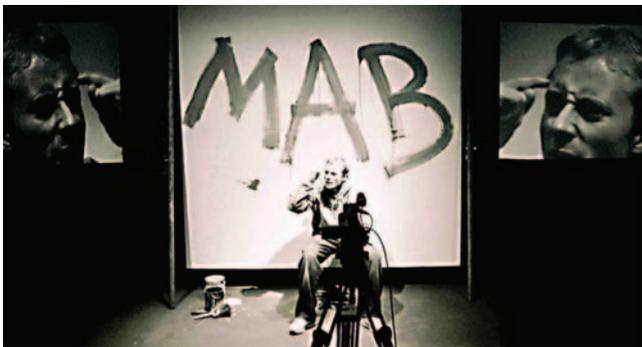
By that time, I'd worked in the theatre in Wales for approximately twenty years, first as a performer and then as a teacher, playwright and director, before coming to Arad Goch as Associate Director. I'd been making all manner of theatre with other professionals for years, and as Practical Tutor at the Department of Theatre Film and Television at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, (where I had graduated in 1980), I'd revised my knowledge of acting theory, and put theory into practice on a daily basis with very large groups of young people. I felt fairly confident that I was qualified to lead creative work; but I was, in the first instance, barely prepared for the very specific challenges of working with young people whose experience of life contrasts so sharply with that of the average drama student, myself included.

The young people that I work with now are guaranteed to arrive at Arad Goch either hyper or exhausted, hungry or hungover, withdrawn, angry, depressed, distressed or preoccupied, or a combination of all of these things, and they're almost always late. For some their condition on any given day depends on whether they've taken their Ritalin, for others on whether they've got a place to sleep that night, or how anxious they are about a court appearance later that day. As a director, I've always been aware of and interested in how a group dynamic affects



creative work, but the dynamic of a group of a dozen young people, all struggling with the symptoms of lives difficult in the extreme, is incredibly complex. One of the most challenging aspects of the work I do is managing an ever shifting group dynamic whilst retaining a clarity of purpose. Even more crucial, however, is the need to maintain a useful degree of distance between me and the gut-wrenching emotional turmoil which is often in the room with me: to remain a theatre practitioner and not become a social worker.

Since *Dead Man's Bong*, Arad Goch, in collaboration with Ysgol Ceredigion (previously known as the Pupil Referral Unit) and Ceredigion Social Services Youth Justice Team, has run several performance projects, in which the needs and concerns of young people are at the very heart of the creative activity. The aim of each project has been to make and perform a new piece of theatre to an invited audience of family and friends, teachers and care workers. The creative process is structured to provide opportunities to explore issues as well as to gain creative and other transferrable skills, including participation in discussion, a sense of responsibility, respect for others, listening and taking advice/direction, and teamwork. The actual performances provide an opportunity for each young person to be a visible, audible part of something perceived by both their peers and the adults in the audience as successful. It is an opportunity for people with little or no status in everyday life to make an impact.



Photographs courtesy Sera Moore Williams.

Scheduling is a concern for all theatre companies, but my suggestion to schedule a project for December one year was met with trepidation, not by Arad Goch, but by colleagues from Ysgol Ceredigion and the Social Services. Christmas is a notably difficult time for many of the young people with whom we work, but I hoped that the project might provide a focus that would deflect some of the problems. What we eventually achieved was *Christmas Spirit* (December 2000), a nativity play like no other, where 'all the usual suspects' were lined up in the style of an identity parade to be questioned about a teenage pregnancy. It was a positive experience for all concerned, and humbling for the more privileged amongst us. A very tough youngster cried when his even tougher father ignored all our pleas to turn up for the first performance, and then cried again when his dad arrived just in time for the second performance, having changed his mind at the eleventh hour and run all the way from the other side of town to get there. Using the same slot in another year, *Happy Day* (December 2002) – a panto set in a children's home – became a hilarious yet poignant tale of adult hypocrisy and youthful revenge, as well as an opportunity to think about and express what each and every one of the participants would really wish for from a fairy godmother. 'A house' and 'a life' are two of their wishes that have stayed with me.

ID (October 2001) was a project which offered the young people a chance to enhance performance skills on an almost one-to-one basis with expert practitioners. It was also a vehicle for exploring identity. Although the language of the projects is always predominantly English, the actors who work with us are bilingual, and we actively encourage anyone who can to speak Welsh to us. Most of the young people initially deny that they can speak Welsh, possibly because their main experience of the language has been at school, and school for the most part has very negative connotations for most of

them. It's been a joy, and possibly a measure of the success of the work, to see the language being reclaimed as something that for the first time for them probably has some status attached to it. During each project people who have been extremely reluctant to speak Welsh have begun to relish their ability to speak a word here or a sentence there.

Physical action has historically been the starting point for improvisation in most of the projects, and sequencing physical images into a visual narrative has often made up the main body of the production. However, both of the most recent projects, *Big Buts* (March 2003) and *Driving Me Crazy* (March 2004), have focused on creating dialogue, and on the discipline of learning and remembering lines. Both plays explored the fact that our actions do have consequences. Whilst 'Big Buts' was a comedy of errors, *Driving Me Crazy*, an issue-based play was intensely personal and emotional for some of the participants and their families.

Working with only one youth worker on *Dead Man's Bong*, I quickly learned that the higher the ratio of practitioners to young people the better. We have found that the professional actors who work with us hold an instant fascination for the young people, and that their presence alone seems to give credence to work which can I'm sure at times seem strange and irrelevant. The actors are involved in all stages of the project, including the performances themselves: they provide a safety net, supporting, and even directing when needs be, from within the piece. The actors also create a role model for the participants when, later on in the process, I have to assume the role of director in a more obvious way; this is a transition fraught with difficulties in a room full of people who take issue with anyone vaguely resembling a figure of authority.

A musician who worked with us on one project likened the process of trying to keep all the participants in the same room and focused at any one time to 'herding cats'. It's an image that has stuck in my mind. The occasions when the whole company has been in the same space and focused on the project have been extremely rare, and are seen by all as nothing short of miraculous. As a consequence I have learned to work in a permissive way, seizing the moment as it arises, working as and when it is possible. We have also learned that it is crucial to have a number of carers at hand to work with the young people who leave the room for any number of reasons.

As a writer, much of my recent work has been inspired and informed by the young people I've worked with in the course of the last few years. I was commissioned by the National Eisteddfod of Wales to write a play for the 2001 Eisteddfod, and wrote and directed *Mab*, a play based on a true story about a young boy who went missing and a young impostor (who was looking for a family) who 'returned' in his place. The company Y Gymraes was invited to perform *Mab* (in its English translation, *Son*) at the ASSITEJ conference in Seoul, South Korea in 2002, where it was picked up and translated into Hungarian for performance by the Kolibris Theatre Budapest.

Confetti (2002), a play written in conjunction with actors at Arad Goch, dealt with the rough and tumble of two brothers growing up in less than easy circumstances, and has toured to schools and community venues playing in English and Welsh to thousands of young people between the ages of 13 and 16. *Riff* (March 2004), my most recent production with Arad Goch, was written in conjunction with a performer and musician. A hard-hitting look at the life of a young boy growing up on the edges of Welsh society, the play draws on a tragic incident that

took place at Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado. At a time of ever increasing violence in our schools, it is a timely reminder perhaps that we disregard young lives at our own peril, and that as adults we risk reaping what we sow.

We have experienced violent incidents, including assault and vandalism, during the projects at Arad Goch but the success of the projects has far outweighed the failures. Young people now vie for places on the projects. Past participants always want to come back. The building in which we work becomes a place they visit for weeks after a project comes to its conclusion. Two young men turned up a day early for the last project: one of them had chosen to come to Arad Goch rather than go to Spain on holiday with his family. Young people who have been very aggressive, or completely withdrawn, have been encouraged into doing the work, and have dared to be part of a group. Young people who have been dismissed as worthless have dared to succeed. One young man, who was asked what he'd got out of the project, answered, 'Happiness.'

One young man from *Dead Man's Bong* now works as a councillor in a youth drop-in centre; another is in jail for GBH. One young writer is at college, another left school this summer with no plans at all. Some of the young people now have children of their own. Some will be good parents, some won't. We don't expect the work we do to change lives, but I am told time and time again not to underestimate the difference that it makes to them. As a colleague from Ysgol Ceredigion explained, the young people with whom we work 'are not trying to be problems, they are trying to solve them'. I'm constantly touched by their ongoing desire to try to express themselves, and their ability to be creative through thick and thin, and like their inspiring teacher, I am glad that they are 'my problem sometimes'.

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