



Opening Doors in Wales

Paul Harman attended the 2010 Agor Drysau/Opening Doors Festival

[Cwmni Theatr Arad Goch's](#) well organised team, led by Jeremy Turner, successfully delivered the sixth biennial festival 16 -20 March 2010. The title implies "Opening Doors" to other nations and theatre cultures, promoting the companies in Wales to visitors from a other countries. It brought challenging work from Russia, France, Austria and Germany to Aberystwyth.

We enjoyed warm Spring sun for most of the event but the big cloud on the horizon is a fundamental review of the eight long-established TIE and Community companies by Arts Council Wales due in June. These companies have been among the best supported in the UK with higher than average funding on a continuing basis.

If there are going to be serious cuts, as is feared, future provision must be shaped by the geography of Wales, a land of valleys, lakes and mountains and small communities. Producing organisations will be needed in North, Mid- and South Wales, with a remit to create a range of work for different kinds of audience within the field of TYA. And in both languages. Arad Goch's beautiful and flexible building in Aberystwyth as a base for touring to schools and for the essential biennial international festival, linking Wales to the World, offers one excellent model. But, like every other part of the UK, Wales needs more voices, not fewer, and more experienced theatre workers in TYA, not fewer.

Shows

The best shows from Wales are a match for any you may see at festivals around the world. Of the shows seen this year, Theatr Iolo's new creation *Ugly Truth* is a vehicle for stunningly good performances from two actresses. It is not so much the content that matters - bullying and peer pressure - as the high quality of the acting, and the way the two actors switch between contrasting roles so confidently.

Arad Goch brings great calmness and clarity to Danish writer Michael Ramlose's *A Word is a Word*. This delightful game with words, their meanings, qualities and emotional colour, is simple in structure and language. The experienced actors in Arad Goch's resident team bring an effortless confidence to the production.

Cath Aran captures our respect and awe for a beautifully crafted storytelling play, in which Cath herself is accompanied by a fine actor and fiddle player. Although we saw the show in English, it is also played, with different rhythms, in Welsh. (*Cath a Ffidi Id*)

Of the work from other countries, Barnstorm from Kilkenny brought a fine production of Mike Kenny's *Boy with a Suitcase* in which the economy of the text is matched by a clarity

and elegance in the direction by Philip Hardy and an open and honest acting style.

Body Parcours is a contemporary dance piece which uses the language and vocabulary of *parcours* agility, with rolls, leaps and flowing movements through and around objects and other dancers. Of the six performers, two were actually *parcouristes* able to run vertically up walls and leap 20 feet over three people.

The German company with a French name, Les Voisins, created the delightful *Queen of Colours* show based on projected live drawing, live music and shadow puppetry several years ago. It still works. They also showed *Farewell Benjamin*, a newer piece with a different range of objects and puppet forms to describe in calm and very matter of fact detail the processes of dying and burial, funerals and family rituals. Unlike the famous Goodbye Mr Muffin, this show does not encourage us to weep but rather to accept death as a normal part of life.

Les Voisins do not have confident English and I wonder if it is not better either to present such shows at festivals in the original language or to have native speakers deliver the text as an accompaniment to action by the foreign cast. Less satisfactory is the solution offered by the Russian company in *Nachalo* (In the Beginning). Very few words are used at all in this sceptical retelling of the Book of Genesis which seems designed primarily for an overseas market. More Russian words would have added richness to the performance which a vocabulary of grunts and sighs cannot.

I also regret that our only opportunities to hear Welsh spoken at length were a poem of welcome read by Arad Goch's Board Chairman – not something you would often meet in England! - and a rather confusing and highly emotional monologue in the presentation of a TIE programme by Theatr Powys.

Dewch i Siarad Cymraeg!

To have a stable community of experienced Welsh-speaking actors is vital if a tradition of popular theatre is to be established and maintained in Wales. Theatre is an essential medium for energising and developing language and TYA in Wales must continue to contribute to keeping Welsh relevant to young people. In the 21st Century, people will need to speak and respond to more languages than ever before and bilingualism is a spur to many other kinds of personal, cultural and creative development. Just as theatre itself is a force for creative development, theatre in the languages of one's community is essential for community cohesion and an individual's secure emotional and social development.

The mix of performance spaces – studio and large theatre in the University Arts Centre, Arad Goch's own studio theatre, a church hall and school halls – offers the visitor a clear perspective on the wide range of contexts within which TYA needs to be delivered in Wales.

The whole festival week was a celebration leading to World Children's Theatre Day. On Thursday 18 March a box containing the record of a year's work in Wales was formally handed over to be archived at the National Library of Wales. Welsh generosity to theatre for young audiences over the last thirty years has not been misplaced. It is a fitting response to a national treasure.

Paul Harman