

Open Culture: National Theatre Wales by John McGrath

Guimarães, Open City Project

August 2012

National Theatre Wales is a new theatre for an old but emerging nation. Part of the UK for many centuries, Wales now has a semi-independent government with control over key services such as health, education, and culture.

As part of this shift in powers two new theatre companies were created in Wales – [Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru](#) and [National Theatre Wales](#). Both company names mean the same thing but in two different languages – Welsh (TGC), the native language of the country spoken by about 25% of the population, and English (NTW), which is spoken by everyone but associated with the big neighbour across the border.

So NTW has, of its essence, a complex relationship to nation and identity.

Like all theatre companies in the UK however, it is run as an independent organisation not as a government entity. So when I was invited, with a small group of colleagues, to set up the company in 2009 we were free to find our own answers to the questions facing us.

Landscape

As well as the question of language, a number of other factors about theatre in Wales fed into our thinking:

Wales has a relatively small population (3 million) spread quite thinly across the country. While there are some cities, the largest (Cardiff) has a population of just 300,000, and there is a historic distrust of centralisation. The option of a national theatre based in a large building in the capital city was not an idea that had much support.

But neither does the country have an extensive network of ‘regional’ or city theatres. Its local theatres often focus on amateur performance – which has a stronger history in Wales than professional theatre.

Meanwhile, much of the most distinctive theatre work in Wales in the past 40 years has been more experimental, and more European, than is usual in British theatre. Companies such as [Brith Gof](#) and organisations such as the [Centre for Performance Research](#), had, over several decades, brought major world figures to Wales to create work and train artists, and had themselves created extraordinary productions, often sited outside of theatre spaces.

Overall, there seemed to be little to be gained in trying to set up National Theatre Wales on either a venue based or a touring model. Neither of these traditions had a strong foothold in Wales. We would have to create something new for this specific country at this specific time.

An interactive approach

The specific time had some interesting features to it. 2009 was the point at which web 2.0 had really established itself and the prospect of building a genuine interactive online community was very real. And within theatre itself, the old divide between ‘professional’ and ‘community’ work (the traditional terms used in the UK) was breaking down as companies such as [Punchdrunk](#) popularized interactive theatre, and artists such as [Rimini Protokoll](#) created internationally renowned work with performers who had often never been on stage before. My own work in the past few years had been at [Contact](#) in Manchester, where we had developed democratic approaches to theatre, involving the young people who were the focus of the company in all of the theatre’s key decisions.

With all of these factors in mind we wanted to set up a company that would be at its heart a community, exploring the possibilities of theatre in Wales through an ever-expanding creative conversation.

How we do this is still a journey of discovery, but here are a few of the things we have done so far:

community.nationaltheatrewales.org

The first thing we did was set up an online community. Using the commercially available [ning](#) platform, we invited everyone with an interest in Welsh theatre to join us at our community site, where all of our ideas – and those of anyone who joined the site – could be shared and debated. We also invited people to use this community as a place to talk about their own work.

This community site is our equivalent of a venue – a space where we can meet and talk to artists, audiences, activists, all sorts of people – and where most of the conversations are started not by NTW staff, but by the thousands of community members. The site has become a key place for people to share ideas about theatre – to find collaborators and to publicise their own work as well as finding out about ours. There have been creative projects set up on the site, collaborations formed and campaigns started.

We are often asked how we control content on the site. The simple answer is that we don’t – we trust our community to regulate itself.

[Theatre Map of Wales](#)

For our opening season of work we created a programme of shows all across the landscape of Wales, from cities and mining towns to villages and mountain ranges. Every month for a year we opened a new piece of theatre.

Each piece was ‘located’, that is to say it was created with a specific relationship to the environment where it was made, and each used a different form of theatre making – from site-specific work to newly commissioned plays, from re-imagined classics to interactive installations. The ‘theatre map’ took us on a journey through Wales and also on a journey through the possibilities of theatre. Each work was made by a different team of artists (NTW doesn’t have a fixed company of actors) and developed and rehearsed in the location where it was presented – building a relationship between local communities and performers.

We also challenged audiences to see as much of the work as possible – if you saw all 12 shows plus the finale (The Passion of Port Talbot) you could claim all of your ticket money back. A number of audience members managed to fulfill the challenge!

The Assembly

Alongside the launch year of productions, The Assembly was an evening of performance and debate created with local people in each of the locations where NTW staged work. In our second year of work, The Assembly has grown into an increasingly independent project where ‘bids’ are encouraged from across Wales from groups who want to ‘host’ an Assembly – using its format of performance mixed with debate to highlight and explore an urgent local issue. Every few months a new group of bids are published online and the public votes on which project NTW should undertake.

We think these are the first ever ‘democratically-elected’ theatre events, and have they created considerable excitement among groups bidding to take part.

TEAM

National Theatre Wales TEAM provides a wide range of ways to be involved with NTW. Anyone can join TEAM, and involvement can range from becoming a community performer in a show, spreading the word through local networks or training in backstage roles. Many TEAM members start by being involved in a particular local production but go on to [engaging with NTW in a wide range of ways](#). NTW provides leadership training for TEAM members who want to set up their own projects – and successful activities run by TEAM members include a popular ‘spoken word’ night, a youth video project and a community radio station.

TEAM members are consulted on NTW’s plans and programme, and the [TEAM panel](#) is a small group TEAM members from across the country who will meet with NTW staff and its Board to input on all the big decisions.

WalesLab

One of our newest initiatives, WalesLab takes the principles behind the Theatre Map of Wales and applies it to emerging artists and the development of new work. Every few months we invite artists to suggest new ideas they would like to try out. Chosen projects are then provided with resources and spaces in locations throughout Wales selected to match the concept - ranging from an airport to a post office!

When appropriate, local audiences are invited to visit or view work in progress - meaning that new theatre experiments are exposed to a wider range of feedback and input than often happens in specialist arts environments.

The Future

NTW is exploring an exciting range of projects over the next few years – with significant international initiatives, an ever-growing commitment to local engagement and new digital possibilities.

We are currently in the midst of our second season, in which we have created a new format for theatre livecasting ([hyper-connected theatre](#)), explored [new forms of online artist](#)

[collaboration](#), deepened our commitment to involving TEAM members in all our activities, and set up some very exciting international partnerships.

We have found that the best way for us to be a national theatre is by being local, international, and digitally linked. We continue to learn from examples across the world, and we look forward to making many new links, as well as plenty of new theatre, in the years to come.

Earlier this year we sat down and tried to sum up our work in one paragraph. This is what we decided to say:

The nation of Wales is our stage: from forests to beaches, from aircraft hangers to post-industrial towns, from village halls to nightclubs. We bring together storytelling poets, visual visionaries and inventors of ideas. We collaborate with artists, audiences, communities and companies to create theatre in the English language, rooted in Wales, with an international reach. You'll find us round the corner, across the mountain and in your digital backyard.

From its earliest days National Theatre Wales has aimed first and foremost to be a community – of people discovering the possibilities of theatre. We have found a way to be 'national' by digging in to the local, and we have organised ourselves through open networks. At the same time, the company has very quickly become [one of the most critically acclaimed theatres in the UK](#). We believe that these two things are deeply linked. Indeed, probably our best-known piece of work to date, [The Passion](#), was also our [biggest community event](#), and our [most far-reaching digital project](#).

It is through open, risky ways to be a company that we discover exhilarating new ways to make theatre.

John E McGrath is the founding Artistic Director of National Theatre Wales, which has quickly established a reputation for ambitious new productions, many of them in unusual locations. Previously John was Artistic Director of Contact, Manchester, where among other productions, he directed Storm and Something Dark by Lemn Sissay, Perfect by Kaite O'Reilly and Paul Clay, and Somewhere the Shadow by Jeff Noon. In 2005 he was awarded the NESTA Cultural Leadership Award.

This paper (Open Culture: National Theatre Wales by John McGrath has been commissioned by Watershed as part of Open City, a project that is part of the Cidade (City) Programme for Guimarães, Portugal – European Capital of Culture in 2012.

As part of the Open City strand, [Watershed](#) has curated a series of [artistic interventions](#) as well as commissioned [think pieces](#) which will explore the concept of openness in relation to city development. Open City provides the opportunity for Guimarães to establish a leadership role for open city development. It is a knowledge exchange programme that will help to re-draw approaches to city-making and change the ways we plan, deliver services and engage communities.

This work will be both published online and presented in Guimarães, providing the context and the content for a symposium to be held in the city in November 2012.

www.watershed.co.uk/opencity

