



# theatre in wales

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## Ghost City in New York

Simon Harris

Gary Owen has been widely acclaimed as one of the most exciting new playwrights to emerge in Wales in recent years. Earlier this year, Sgript Cymru took his latest production, *Ghost City*, to 59E59 in New York – a recently established theatre with a focus on the staging of new writing. *New Welsh Review* asked Sgript Cymru's Artistic Director, Simon Harris, to keep a performance diary.

### May 30th, 2004

We walk past 59E59 for our first look at the theatre. It's tempting to go in, but with a whole week to go on our stay there will be plenty of time. Looking at the high-tech glass and steel of 59E59, I am reminded of how I got here.

Just over a year ago, an e-mail arrived out of the blue from a man called Peter Tear. Peter had seen a review of *Indian Country* when it had played at The Traverse, and had tracked me down. Would we be interested in bringing a production to New York? It seemed far-fetched, but nothing was going to stop me from pursuing it. After a phone call and a few e-mails, I arranged to meet Peter with Elysabeth Kleinhans. Peter had a background in Scottish theatre, but having emigrated his accent was now a patrician mix of Manhattan and Morningside. From the first, however, Peter established the reverent aura around Elysabeth that is normally accorded only to aristocracy, celebrities and the fantastically wealthy. It soon became clear which category Elysabeth was in. She was clearly very, very, very rich. The theatre (59E59) was not yet finished at this stage, but it was going to be the home of Primary

Stages – one of the top new writing companies in New York – and it was being built entirely out of her own money. In order to fund the building, she had sold some land she owned on the Upper East Side to Donald Trump to build a Trump Tower (how many Trump Towers does the world need?) and retained some of the land to build her own theatre there. In the vague hope of selling *Ghost City*, I took Gary Owen along to the old world grandeur of The Goring Hotel in London's Victoria, where Peter and Elysabeth were staying after their talent-scouting trip to the Edinburgh festival. By this time I was expecting to meet Manhattan royalty, but a bird-like Elysabeth proved to be much more down to earth than I had anticipated, and she clearly had some practical experience of working in the theatre. Gary doesn't like talking that much about his work – he's now given up on press interviews – and Elysabeth's increasingly confused attempts to get to grips with what the play was actually 'about' made for an unpromising start, but somehow, after discussing the finances, we got through it and, by the end, Peter was saying, 'There's no doubt about this, is there? I mean this is a done deal, isn't it?'

And so it was. We were going to New York.

### May 31st, 2004

In the morning, I drop by the theatre to see how the get-in is going and to take a look at the space. Our stage management team – Steve Hawkins and Lyndsey Owen – are super-efficient and totally unfazed by anything, so there is an air of preternatural calm to the work in Theatre B, our 99-seat venue. There are a couple of transatlantic innovations that prove somewhat surprising, however. The walls are blue and the box for the technicians is entirely sealed, so messages have to be relayed by running in and out of the auditorium. That aside, it is a very comfortable, intimate and well-run theatre. We have had to compromise on

space, but the play will look beautiful in here.

Leaving the team to get on with it, I bump into Elysabeth as she opens up her office. The sharp letter-box window of her office on the top floor is like an eyrie looking out across the street and down on the foyer, whereas everybody else at 59E59 is housed in a warren of offices buried in the basement, a set-up which seems to be making an interesting statement. However, Elysabeth is immediately very warm and welcoming, and apologises that she only read about three quarters of *Ghost City* before giving up, as she hadn't understood it. Ah.

#### June 1st, 2004

The play is opening tonight. The actors arrive at eleven, excited to be in New York and already impressed with the theatre itself. We decide to petition Elysabeth to build an identical one in Cardiff somewhere.

On arrival at the theatre in the evening, Theatre B is roped off and a small queue of about seven has formed. I think to myself, 'Oh well, it could have been worse.' At times, there has been a strange dislocation of priorities between us and the people at 59E59. We have mainly worried about whether we would get an audience, especially as top price tickets are selling for \$40 each. Elysabeth, however, was focussing more on the themed cocktails the bar would be serving for *Ghost City*. In the end, she had decided on a particular drink because it reminded her of Caspar the ghost...

The queue is getting a little agitated, having to wait until the house is open. One man moans vociferously that this is what had happened when he came to see *Heavenly*. It's not looking nasty yet, but there's still time. We take our seats and I find a spot to take notes, where no-one can see me twitching. The seven people take their seats. But then another couple arrive. A few more come in. Then a group of eight

turn up. It's picking up. The audience is a mixture of young and old; eastside sophisticates and city-wide regulars. I look at Ade, who squeezes my hand. The audience keeps on coming. The show is held for a few moments as the audience builds to near capacity. Now I am overwhelmed by a new thought. I am convinced they are going to hate it and steel myself for the walkouts. At the first 'c\*\*t' they'll be running for the doors. I know it. I've already been warned: New Yorkers can cope with most stuff, but not 'c\*\*t'.



Gary Owen's *Ghost City*  
(photograph courtesy Sgript Cymru).

The lights go to black and the opening burst of fractured electronic music hums out of the dark. The light comes up on Celyn Jones. If the audience is good, we usually get a couple of laughs here. Surprisingly, Celyn gets quite a number of laughs, but the first scene is comic and audiences always laugh early, until they know what they are watching. The audience settles and then, as the play develops, I can sense them gradually tuning into Gary's distinctly twisted world. The loaded, ironic bluff and double bluff of his writing seems to chime with their sensibilities, and the Manhattan audience are clearly 'getting' the play in a way that no audience has seemed to before. There is a palpable openness to its idiosyncrasy, its passion and its layers.

The show finishes. The audience is genuinely warm and appreciative in the curtain call, while the actors have an extra special gleam in their eyes from knowing that this is their first night in New York (for God's sake). In the bar afterwards, some of the audience are effusive. One

woman tells Celyn that it's the best thing she has ever seen. 'Really?' he asks. This hasn't happened very often in Wales. 'Sure!' she says, 'You're going all the way to Broadway!' I am just stunned that nobody walked out. Rachel Isaac tells me, 'I knew all along the New York audience would love it. Manhattan audiences are very intelligent.' And it's true. Rachel knows everything.

### June 3rd, 2004

We're planning to see some other theatre while we are here. The favourites are *Bug* by Tracey Letts, featuring Amanda Plummer, and some kind of musical – *The Producers*, maybe. We brave the subway for the first time and head on down to Times Square to queue at the famous Ticket Booth.

Later, with a ticket for *Assassins* at a place that used to be Studio 54, we find an anonymous bar on Eighth Avenue and have a drink. Placed to our right is a sign with some lads on a beach that proclaims, 'You can take the boy out of the valley, but you can't take the valley out of the boy. Rhymney RFC on tour '03.'



Gary Owen's *Ghost City* (photograph courtesy Sgript Cymru).

We head for the theatre. The production is by The Roundabout Theatre Company and there is a good buzz about it, as it has been nominated for a number of Tonys. Entering the theatre, you pass through a wide passageway with large mirrors on both sides and enormous chandeliers hanging above, in what is clearly a vestige of the last great days of disco. When the theatre opens out, there is a steep banked circle and in the stalls a big cabaret style set-up, with people able to sit at candlelit tables and a bar at the back for drinks. The chairs look uncomfortable, so I am glad we are in the circle. The inside of the theatre, which is ornate and wood-panelled, is seemingly very old. The building was originally a theatre, then it was converted into Studio 54; later it stood empty for some time, and then it was converted back into a theatre for the opening of Sam Mendes' *Cabaret* with Alan Cumming. *Assassins* was also once a Donmar production, but this version is bold and robust, where the Donmar would have been intimate and edgy. Anyhow, Ade loves it and we both find it very entertaining and spectacular, with hardly any Broadway schmaltz at all.

Today is Celyn Jones' birthday and we have all promised to meet up in a bar in The Village to celebrate. We arrive at the piano bar that is Mary's Cave, not far from the The Stonewall pub. Rachel quickly fills us in on the form, as she has been here so many times before. Anyone can step up to the piano and sing a song from their chosen musical. Afterwards everybody has to put dollar bills into an enormous goldfish bowl that sits on the piano itself and pays for the hard work of the pianist. Mary, whose cave we are in, is in mid-song as we arrive and is putting her ample heart and soul into a barnstorming number. Most of the cast have good voices, but they are all somewhat intimidated on hearing the many brilliant performances by the regular clientele, the vast majority of which can only be off-duty musical theatre actors singing their hearts out. The New York ethic of tipping is at its most

punishing here, in that not only do you have to tip the barman a dollar a drink, but you also have to tip the pianist for each song as well. We soon start running out of money and Rachel – feeling a little ashamed of us – starts urging everyone to put more money in, while topping up the shortfall herself. Eventually Celyn, Johnny Floyd and Celyn's girlfriend, Kate, sing solos, with Rachel offering massage plus vocal tips and Johnny's performance being particularly lovely.

Spilling out onto the streets at three o'clock and with party animal John Floyd contemplating a dubious-looking place called Rawhide, it's time for our yellow cab moment. Our moustachioed driver looks like a survivor of the American Civil War, and the cab smells as if it has been through a few battles as well. We set off uptown. I sit in the front, with Nia, Soutra and Ade in the back giggling and gossiping. The streets are clear and the cab driver has the radio playing. Suddenly, *Jumpin Jack Flash* by The Stones erupts from the speakers. This is pure Scorsese. I look back at the others: 'We're driving through the heart of New York – in a yellow cab – listening to The Rolling Stones! How cool is that?' At the wheel, Travis Bickle turns the music up loud and we all break into a spontaneous cheer.

### June 4th, 2004

Tonight is quite an important night for us, as there are specially invited guests coming to see the performance. Catrin Brace from the National Assembly's Wales International Centre is inviting people to the performance and distributing her promotional material about the Welsh in America. The first sentence of this glossily produced brochure reads 'The Welsh are 100% British.' Uh-huh. I can see where she's coming from. One review has been very good, while another has begun with a plea for someone to explain which part of England this play is located in.

We gather in the bar and I am introduced to a man called Michael

Johnson Chase from The Link Play Development Centre who is keen to 'broker' a meeting with his artistic director. We agree to have a breakfast meeting on Sunday morning. The location is on the Upper West Side at his local diner. It also happens to be the diner used for the external shots of 'Seinfeld'. I am going to be having a meeting in Jerry, George and Kramer's diner...

We take some photographs of the cast looking suitably glamorous, and even manage to persuade Catrin to be in one for our records. 'If this ends up in *The Western Mail*, you'll be hearing from my solicitor,' she threatens. Even the Welsh can become litigious after a period in New York, it seems.

#### **June 6th, 2004**

The cast have done two tiring shows today. When I arrive at the theatre after the evening performance, Nia and Rachel are waiting at the exit in costume as the audience is leaving. They are waiting to lynch two young girls who have sat in the front row and talked all the way through. Before I can calm things down, they have stopped the two offending teenagers and told them politely, but very firmly, how upset they are with their behaviour. This causes mild turmoil for Front of House, who feel it should have been left to them, but when I read the FOH reports for the previous show that day, I understand why the cast have been so on edge:

During the performance, a woman left the show, stating she wasn't feeling well. A couple sitting in Row E of the house decided to leave the show early, but realized they left a jacket in their row. They insisted we retrieve it immediately. They gave the ushers one location to look in, but it wasn't there. Then another location. By the third location, I went in myself and found the damn thing, and I commented on how remarkably rude it is not only to leave the show

early, but to leave something behind and yell at us to get it. I don't think that couple will be returning any time soon. Apparently a man and woman sitting in Row A began arguing over the armrest during the performance. Eventually, the woman got up and moved to B2.

The cast confirmed the armrest story. Apparently, neither party made any concession to the fact that they were attending a performance, so involved were they in their private war. Just before the woman had stood up, she had shouted loudly, 'Stop it! You're hurting me!!' Previously in the week, two people had turned up and had asked to sit in the back row, so that 'they could make out'. Clearly, Peter Tear will have his work cut out to enforce his sense of theatre etiquette across the state of New York.

As it's my last night, there's a party in the bar afterwards. It seems like there has been a party in the bar every night. Peter and I have the chance for a long chat about how great the experience has been. In passing, I tell him that the previous day we'd been to Staten Island. 'My God!' he says. 'I've never been to Staten Island, but when I lived in South Kensington, my next door neighbour was the daughter of the family that owned half the island.' Peter is a class act. I should bring him to Adamsdown one day and see who he knows there. When I am about to leave, I approach him to shake his hand. Unexpectedly, he gives me a warm hug. He has been a fantastic host and a loyal friend.

'Thank you,' I say.

'We made it happen,' he replies.

#### **June 7th, 2004**

The day we fly back, I'm woken by an early morning phone call. It's Peter, sounding bright as a button. 'I want to read you this,' he says. It turns out to be an excellent review in *The New York Sun*. 'You'll have to come back next year now,' he says. Yes, I think to myself, we just might.

## T H E A T R E

## Corsica, Cardiff

Ed Thomas

Ed Thomas's new play, *Stone City Blue*, opens at Theatr Clwyd this autumn. In this piece, he reflects on the process of writing his first play in six years, following the widespread success of his previous work, which includes *House of America* and *Song From A Forgotten City*.

claims to have walked from Calvi to Galeria in a day – all of 31 kms. When he's settled, he turns to the emerging barman and in halting English with detailed hand gestures says, 'ONE... LARGE... BEER... S'IL VOUS PLAÎT. I AM CZECH REPUBLIC. THANK YOU. I KNOW BUDVAR. BEER... GRAZIE.'

And then there's me: Welsh and on holiday for the first time in two years; hot, slightly burnt, staring at an empty A4 refill pad, pen in hand, a cold Corsican beer called Pietra in front of me and 2000 words to write for *New Welsh Review* by tomorrow morning...



Ed Thomas, *House of America* (courtesy Fiction Factory)

It's 4.25 on a Saturday afternoon in the hills above Galeria, a small village south of Calvi on the west coast of Corsica. I'm one of three men sitting at separate tables in the shade of a quiet bar near the square. One of the men is a lunatic drunk lost in a ritual of nodding to no-one in particular, talking to himself, sipping beer and pastis and shouting 'Ça va?' at random passers-by who don't reply. The second is a flustered and bearded backpacker with a very red face who, after slamming down his rucksack,

Gulp.

This piece is meant to be a kind of diary tracking the progress of writing a new play, starting back in September 2003 and bringing us right up to this summer, but my diary entries have been intermittent to say the least, and even when I have made an entry or two, generally they've been either too personal or profane to commit to print. So it's now the summer of 2004, and I'm staring at a photograph of nothing.

I order another beer.

I swallow.

Surely I can come up with something better than the vulgar reality of my diary?

But I don't find writing easy, any kind of writing, a play, an article, an essay, anything. I start to sweat, feeling like a Welsh outside half who suddenly can't find touch (and in recent years I'm one of many). The outside half is a confidence player, a playmaker: without confidence he can't play, his legs feel heavy, his fingers stick to the ball, the crowd turns against him, his game falls apart.

But at least he's in the game. I haven't even got onto the pitch.

WHAT KIND OF BULLSHIT WRITER AM I?

WHY THE FUCK DID I SAY YES?

The lunatic in the bar senses my distress.

'Ça va?' he asks.

'Non,' I say.

'ONE... LARGE... BEER... BONJOUR,' says the Czech walker to the barman, who's emptying my filling ashtray.

We sit in silence.

All of us in different ways melting: in 26 degrees heat; slowly going crazy.

Maybe all three of us have got sunstroke. Maybe we've imagined each other. Maybe there's only one of us in the bar and the other two don't exist. Have I imagined the other two in the desperation of trying to get something down? Are they just voices in my head?

But what if I keep listening to them?

What is it apart from beer that they want?

What do they see or think or hear?

What do they remember? Is it just companionship they want? Just another human being to talk to? If I speak to them what would I say? Would I take them back to sometime in September when this imaginary diary started? A Monday in Cardiff when I would have done anything that day other than what I was supposed to do? Shall I describe to them what a typical morning back then was like? Will they care? I swallow the bitter Corsican beer. I'm a dangling man without a choice. Do it. Do

it. Do it. I put a reluctant pen to a blank white paper.

Sometime in September 2003. Cardiff.

I set the alarm for 7.00. I press snooze six times and crawl out of bed at 8.10. Feel exhausted already. Numb. I eat breakfast, wash last night's dishes, walk the dog, pay a parking fine, then a speeding fine, pay the gas, phone and electricity bills, make three phone calls and still it's only 9.45. Short of digging a six foot trench in the garden with a blunt shovel and lying in it in the pouring rain till somebody notices, everything that I could have done has been done.

But I still can't face going upstairs.

So I fill the kettle to the top, light a cigarette and wait for it to boil. If there was a power cut I'd have an excuse. Or a bomb alert. But it doesn't look like I'm in luck.

Time to face facts.

I haven't written a play since 1998. I was thirty-seven. Next July I'll be forty-three.

SIX YEARS OF NOTHING AND YOU CALL YOURSELF A PLAYWRIGHT?

It's longer than I thought. Fuck. I've done other things, I know, but...

A lot has changed since then. Am I still the man I used to be? Or just a pale imitation? A husk? A bag of bones with thoughts?

Incoherent, dark, lost?

Am I just another stray dog in the city?

Looking for a scent, a path, a way, to feel connected again? To belong? To love and be loved, to be home?

What's home? The place you live? A house or a dwelling? A birthplace? A place dear to you? A place where something is invented, founded or developed? Is Cardiff home? Or is home where my parents live, in Cwmgiedd, where despite being seventy-three my father still runs a butcher's shop and small slaughter house next to what was once Ec's tyre service? Ec is short for Edgar: they amputated his legs just below the knee. Too much smoking. He only ever went on holiday with a rope, a fire extinguisher and a hammer.

Is that home? Or is home not a place you want to return to but a time? What time? Childhood? Youth? Is home for me the period between 1988 and 1998 when I wrote ten plays and travelled all over the place? Was it easy then? Was it?

The mobile phone rings  
 I press busy  
 The kettle boils  
 Then the landline phone rings  
 The dog howls to the phone's ring tone  
 I make the coffee and try to ignore it  
 Don't answer it you're busy  
 The answer machine kicks in  
 BT call minder  
 The mobile beeps message  
 Jesus, it's like Piccadilly in here  
 HOW CAN I WRITE IN THIS?

I switch off the mobile, turn the landline to silent and don't listen to the message.  
 The dog stops howling.  
 Perfect.



by stress, tail between her legs, wary eyes, unloved, unwanted, a raindog. A raindog is a lost dog in the city who after a rainstorm loses its trail home. And I'm staring at one. And it takes one to know one. We take her for a trial walk. Things don't look too good. She doesn't run, she doesn't sniff, she just ambles around aimlessly. I say we can't have a dog with no spirit. She must have heard me: the last five minutes of the walk she perks up, starts to run, ears pricked up in the last chance saloon. We keep her. The friend throws in a collar and lead and a couple of dog bowls.

We got the dog from a friend who said she'd been abandoned twice, and did we want her. When she came into the house she was the sorriest looking dog I'd ever seen. Black coat cut short, overweight, bad eczema on her rump caused



Both images on this page are from Ed Thomas's *Gas Station Angel* (courtesy Fiction Factory).

Bingo. Raindog number one is saved. We change her name from the inherited 'Marmite' to 'Boo'. Why Boo? It's a long story: suffice to say we've bonded and she knows this – that's why she's confident enough to howl at the phone.

FOR GOD'S SAKE GET UPSTAIRS!

I switch off the radio. The silence hits me like a hammer. Must be the first time in weeks I haven't heard Barry next door banging or drilling the walls. His wife Ruth is expecting their first baby, so Barry's doing DIY to get the house all ready. Alone.

Nice one Barry.

But I'm not knocking him – twice this month I've left the house with no key and twice Barry's been there to open his door, let me walk through his house, jump over the fence and get in the back way

But now even Barry's busy

Somewhere else

Like I should be

Like I promised myself I would be half of last week.

But instead I went to London. Had a few meetings and visited Evans who was having a meal with Jones. Jones goes home early pleading an early start. Me and Evans go to Sahara Nights in King's Cross where friends of his are spinning discs. We arrive back at his place at 6.00 am. He opens a dry sherry and reminds me that 'technically Thomas,

sherry is an aperitif’.

We drink half the bottle. I mumble to him that I’m writing a new play.

‘Good,’ he says. ‘What’s it about?’

‘Never ask a writer what his stuff is about mun Evans,’ I answer tartly.

‘Have you started it yet?’

‘I... course I have... no I haven’t.’

‘Thomas mun... Thomas.’

‘I know, I know.’

Next day I treat him to lunch at The Perseverance. He orders ‘Frittata’. I order devilled kidneys, just for the hell of it.

‘I’m starting it tomorrow,’ I say.

‘Good,’ he says.

On the way back on the train I can see my reflection in the window. I look more and more like my father every day. I remember him asking me once what the plays were about. I said I wasn’t sure. They’re all set in Wales, or at least the Wales that exists in my imagination. It’s often a place on the periphery, on the edge, that may not even exist. It’s a place of unreliable memory, uncertain identity, absent fathers, lost mothers, missing sons, lovers, loners, outsiders, staring out of the windows of hotel rooms, passing trains, a little adrift but still wanting to survive, to still be here, to be ‘yma o hyd’, to belong, to be home. Maybe the idea of home is the thing which binds the stories together. But what is my idea of home? A house overrun by the American Dream? A house which falls into the sea? A lonely hotel room? Or just a time now long gone?

I light a cigarette and go upstairs.

At last.

I sit at my desk.

Six empty ring-bound exercise books sit in front of me. Newly bought. Three white, three yellow. A4 refill pads, 80 leaves, feint and margin ready to go. And pens. Three black. Three blue. Not a computer in sight. Who needs a computer if you’ve got six pens and 480 empty white and yellow pages in front of you?

Hardly anyone believes me when I tell them I still hand-write, and then get poor

Laura at Fiction Factory – who, miraculously, is one of the few who can actually decipher it – to commit it to disk. It used to be Menna, but Menna is too busy now. So Laura gets lumbered. I’m aware that most people would call this process Neanderthal, but for Christ’s sake it’s been six years, and after all that time wouldn’t you stick to the process you’re familiar with? I think of Bjorn Borg, the tennis player. He won five successive Wimbledons from 1977 to 1982 with a wooden racquet, then he retired. Six years later he made a comeback – with the same wooden racquet, but the game had moved on. Everyone else was using harder steel racquets: they hit the ball harder, faster, Borg couldn’t compete. But he wouldn’t change his racquet. Six months later he retired for good. Comeback unsuccessful. Wooden racquet in the bin.

Will this happen to me? Am I making a comeback? Have the times moved on? Will the hard fast racquets of new theatre consign me and my Neanderthal ways to the six foot trench I could have and should have dug with a blunt shovel this morning in the garden?

My choice is a stark one

Either I pick up the pen

Or I pick up the shovel

Which one will it be?

Well?

Well?

Well?

A raindog comes crashing to earth with a bump.

Before I have time to answer my own rhetorical question my reality’s changed.

I’m no longer in Cardiff.

I’m in the Corsican bar, with the lunatic drunk only six inches away from my face. Wasn’t he listening? Doesn’t he know how bastard difficult it is? Doesn’t he?

I can smell his breath, a mixture of beer, pastis, strong cigarettes and black olives. He smiles his three-toothed grin.

‘ÇA VA?’

## T H E A T R E

'Ça va,' I say  
 'Pietra' he says  
 'Pietra?' I say

'Oui, vous achetez un Pietra biere pour mon monsieur? Votre ami?'

I see the Czech walker is watching me intently. The barman is leaning nonchalantly against the cafe door.

Well?

Well?

Well?

Cardiff is a long way away

So is home. But this may be home. Just an idea I keep in my head, a memory.

Am I really in Corsica?

Did I make all this up?

Is this a diary or a piece of fiction?

Truth or lie?

Real or fantasy?

September or June?

Am I Ed Thomas or his anagram Tom Shead?

Am I drunk in the Corsican sun?

Sunstroked?

Did I really finish the play on June 1st and call it *Stone City Blue*? Did I once call it *Crash/City/Story*? Has it got eight characters or four?

Are they four men in an imagined Corsican cafe? One a barman, one a Corse, one a Czech and the other a Welsh writer by the name of Shead?

Will I start rehearsals in Cardiff in September 2004 just a year after I dug a six foot trench in my garden?

Did I dig a trench?

Or did I pick up a pen?

I order three Pietras for the Czech, the Corse and for me. I'll finish the article later

'Ça va?'

Ça va

'Ça va?'

Ça va

'Ça va?'

'Which part of the Czech Republic are you from?'

## Why can't it happen here?

Roger Williams

This spring, Roger Williams was invited to take his latest play, *Lingua*, to New Zealand. The reception that the play received there, in the context of a theatre scene interested primarily in new writing and a cultural variety of voices, prompted him to reflect on the situation in Wales.

The figure of Gollum at Wellington International Airport was at least twenty metres tall. He was arched over the airport's main terminal building with a glint in his eye, trying to reach a large fibreglass ring. It was raining. We'd been travelling for over thirty hours. I was starting to hallucinate. The sight of this giant Gollum was enough to convince me that I needed to sleep. But first we had to find the welcoming party from the New Zealand International Arts Festival that had been sent out in torrential rain to greet us. Welcome to New Zealand.

It was the day after the Oscars. On the journey into the city from the airport, it became apparent that New Zealand was enjoying the afterglow. Not only had *Lord of the Rings* (a film made in New Zealand by a New Zealander) picked up eleven Oscars, but the star of *Whale Rider* (an independent film set in a Maori community) had also been nominated for a statuette. New Zealand was chuffed to bits and wanted its international visitors to know it.

I had been invited to Wellington to present my latest English-language play, *Lingua*, as part of the country's biannual International Arts Festival. But all anyone could talk about today was the Oscars.



Roger Williams in New Zealand

*Lingua* is a play about the death of languages and the attempts of four linguists to convince us that the language they represent is more deserving of survival than the other three. The four characters are Aboriginal, Australian, American, Polynesian and Celtic. It is set in a plush Cardiff hotel. It's a comedy.

The history of the play is a long one. The idea was born when I was writing another play, *Killing Kangaroos*, for Made In Wales in Sydney in 1999. It was in Australia that I learned of the existence of hundreds of Aboriginal languages, and of their rapid

decline since European settlement. I knew that I wanted to write about the loss of these ancient languages, and started to read around the subject. I discovered that 3,000 of the world's 6,000 languages are already dead, and that one language dies on average every two weeks. Over 50 languages have only one living speaker.

When I returned to Wales I was awarded a playwright's bursary by the Arts Council to write the play. *Lingua* was completed in 2002, and I've been working ever since to mount a production of the play in Wales. However, in the current Welsh theatrical climate staging new plays is almost impossible. Since the implementation of the Arts Council of Wales's Drama Strategy in 1999, theatre companies have treated new writing with hostility. I think this is obvious from the sheer lack of new plays in the English language that have made it to the stage. Apart from Sgript Cymru's output, there's very little new writing being produced.

In 2003, I tried to put a production of *Lingua* together with the support of Chapter, the Sherman Theatre Company and Made In Wales. However, even with this triumvirate of experienced organisations backing the project, the Arts Council declined our application for the final £5,000 required to stage the play on the grounds that our marketing strategy wasn't detailed enough.

I subsequently looked further afield with the generous support of Wales Arts International, and, as a result, the play has been read at the Pleasance in London, the Lark in New York and at the New Zealand International Arts Festival in Wellington. It was read in New York for the second time this August. Artistic directors in Salt Lake City, Brisbane and Melbourne are currently considering it.

Carla van Zon, the Artistic Director of the New Zealand International Arts Festival, knew my play would strike a chord with Kiwis because the issue of language is very much on the agenda there. The Maori language is estimated to have 50,000 fluent speakers. Efforts are being made to promote the language, with bilingual education

initiatives and a soon-to-be-launched television channel. However, there is also a tide of opposition rising against the efforts of Maori language campaigners to secure the language's future. Large swathes of white New Zealand don't understand why the indigenous language of their country should be saved.

It's with this debate raging that the festival picked up my play and invited me to work with Christian Penny, a Maori director, and a Kiwi cast, on a reading of *Lingua* at Te Whaea National Dance and Drama Centre. The play was presented after three days of rehearsal, and was followed by a panel discussion on minority languages and their place in theatre. I was joined on the panel by Hone Kouka (Maori playwright), Nathaniel Lees (Samoan playwright/director) and Suchen Christine Lim (Singaporean writer).

It was evident from this discussion that the New Zealand theatre scene thrives on new work, and that it is a focus for the expression of the varied contemporary voices of its peoples, and for the telling of their stories. The new plays of Maori and Polynesian playwrights are considered to be the most exciting work being produced in the country. The plays of writers such as Briar Grace Smith, Tao Fraser and Hone Kouka are in high demand. New Zealand is nurturing its own distinct theatrical voices, and there's a widely held desire to see New Zealand work succeed. Recently, Maori theatre practitioners have been given support to start making work in the Maori language. New Zealand is hungry to hear its own stories – in whichever language.

Speaking from a Welsh perspective, it was difficult to match the enthusiasm of Kiwi theatre practitioners for new work, as the last four years have seen a decline in the amount of new work on our stages. The infamous ACW Drama Strategy was designed to consolidate funding to a smaller number of companies and to increase the quality of those companies' productions. I think it's fair to say that this is generally considered to have happened. However it is also fair to say that increased funding would

allow any director to improve his or her product. The downside of this ACW policy has been the marked decrease in the number of new plays being produced.

While we've seen numerous productions of *Under Milk Wood*, *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it's been difficult to find a contemporary Welsh play in the English language. The Drama Strategy has unwittingly created a theatre culture that performs almost exclusively English and American texts. Large sums of public subsidy are spent staging plays by American and English playwrights while responsibility for new Welsh writing is given to one company, Sgript Cymru, which produces two new English-language plays a year.

While other nations such as New Zealand are actively developing their theatre cultures, Wales is taking a step back. This is certainly true of work in the English language. A generous sum of public money is being poured into theatre companies that seemingly do not want to stage new plays by Welsh writers. But what is it that makes our theatre companies so reluctant to stage our own plays? Why is ACW investing so much public money producing work that could happily sit in the private sector? Is this the theatre culture we want? Whatever happened to the idea of creating a body of Welsh work in the English language? What happened to the concept of an Anglo-Welsh theatre culture?

Surely this is what we need to strive towards. Plays by Welsh writers, in both languages, make the Welsh theatre scene different to that of England. These are what make us distinct. Without new Welsh plays we are simply replicating the work of English companies. I fail to understand, for example, why Sgript Cymru is the only revenue-funded Welsh theatre company to have staged the work of Gary Owen. Gary is undoubtedly Wales's most successful playwright to have emerged in the last four years, and yet we haven't seen a production of one of his plays by Theatr Clwyd Cymru, or by any other company that is in receipt of Arts Council revenue funding. Instead, our artistic directors choose plays we've seen

before. The decision by Theatr Clwyd Cymru to produce *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* so soon after *The Torch* Theatre Company produced it was baffling. In a country as small as Wales, it's difficult to accept that there can't be discussion between companies on their future productions in order to avoid such clashes.

It saddens me that most of Wales's artistic directors show an unwillingness to produce new work on a regular basis. After working in other countries, I have come to the conclusion that our artistic directors simply aren't interested in new Welsh plays. After all, if they were, they would commission and produce them. Like many writers, I'm fed up of hearing artistic directors claim that that new plays are notoriously difficult to sell and therefore a box office risk. We are fortunate enough to be working in a heavily subsidised theatre industry. Isn't that why we receive public funding? To experiment? To take risks? Maybe some of our artistic directors simply aren't interested in Welsh work because they aren't themselves Welsh, or do not want to be responsible for developing 'Welsh' work.

Companies occasionally make a nod towards new writing by producing a token new play – such as Clwyd's production of Meredith Barker's *The Rabbit* – but one new play every three years doesn't create a scene. We require more productions and more commissions. We need a vision for new writing along the lines of Phil Clark's HTV and BBC initiatives in the 1990s, which led to the commissioning of more than twenty writers. Artistic directors need to create opportunities for writers. New plays should be a staple of Welsh theatre.

In Australia, theatre companies such as Sydney Theatre Company are required to produce new plays in order to receive funding, and new plays are performed alongside classics. In New Zealand, plays such as Hone Kouka's *The Prophet* sell out. Frankly, I've seen Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* twice. I don't want to see it again. I want to see new plays with something urgent and relevant to say about the society I live in today. This is what's going on in New Zealand. Why can't it happen here? Welsh-language theatre companies thrive on new writing. Why can't their English-language counterparts achieve the same level of commissioning?

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## Have I the write?

Sam Boardman-Jacobs

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*Radio Scriptwriting*, edited by Sam Boardman-Jacobs, has just been published by Seren Books. In this autobiographical piece, he reflects upon the process of learning and teaching the art of scriptwriting. His extensive experience in the field includes his current post as Reader in Theatre and Media Drama at the University of Glamorgan.

There's an old Jewish maxim that goes, 'Ask me a question and I'll tell you a story.'

### Question:

**How did you learn to write drama scripts and what exactly do you teach?**

### Answer:

In the beginning my world was full of other people's narratives, and in order to survive I had to learn their function.

*Lesson one: Is it the event that we recall or is*

*it the first telling?*

I was born in the hastily converted front parlour of a tiny terrace in a wartime industrial slum on the edge of Wuthering Heights (it was feared that my mother wouldn't benefit from continuing to share a bedroom with her two tubercular elder sisters). Meanwhile, in a Birmingham inner city slum my paternal grandmother crouched down in the coal cellar of her tiny back-to-back house to avoid the Nazi bombs as the rest of our family were being herded into the Lodz Ghetto in Poland, a Bucharest prison and a Dutch transit camp. In the meantime, back in Yorkshire, my maternal grandmother trudged through the frozen snow in the blackout to find the midwife, leaving my mother with the single instruction, 'Whatever you do, don't lay on the floor.'

*Lesson two: you can't counterfeit real dialogue.*

At 6 am, as the midwife told the bus queue of factory workers of my arrival, a man said, 'That's a Jewish child born: there'll be one hundred pounds in the bank for him in the morning.'

Sixty-two years later I'm not sure if there is yet a spare hundred pounds in the bank. But the need for that narrative has survived Auschwitz and Belsen. The neighbours in Birmingham 'knew' that my grandmother had gold under her rotten, rented floorboards. The need therefore to survive these pre-constructed narratives is as great as the need to survive such histories.

Dennis Potter, when asked why he mainly wrote about the people of his beloved Forest of Dean, said, 'Every writer must have an address.' I have neither an address nor a formal education. The middle-class social and educational world is still a little alien to me. I am as at home in it now as, say, a colonist on Mars might be after forty years of residence.

**Question:**

**Why are you so obsessed with narratives and narrative structures?**

**Answer:**

What I received for my birthright, in place of an address, was a cluster of narratives. It is from the unravelling of the cause and need of these tales that I believe I learned narratology and the importance of teaching it.

The narrative of my parents' generation did indeed almost overwhelm my generation's world. We were all hungry by the end of the war. Even meals were just nasty icons of something wonderful we would one day eat. My only close memory of my father is being taken by him to see *The Jolson Story* twelve times. We left each time singing '...friends may all forsake me, let them all forsake me, I'll still have you sonny boy...'

When the blackout was finally lifted I rushed into the streets eager to see those Busby Berkley babes playing their neon light violins in a pulsing incandescent glow down Bristol Street. Nothing actually happened: the light fittings of most of the shop windows had quietly expired during the six years of compulsory blackout.

*Lesson Three: The main drama is usually in the character's anticipation and need of the event.*

**Question 3:**

**Surely you can't teach Art, talent?**

**Answer:**

As this question invariably comes from practitioners who have their foot well in the door and are busy barring it to others, I find it verges on the smug and self-congratulatory. These things are catching. Aspiring entrants to any profession learn not just the job but the attitudes of those in charge. The implication seems to be that they, the 'Artists', have been born with finer feelings and deeper sensitivities than the rest of us. This attitude is just a little too reminiscent of class snobbery and prejudice for me to ignore.

The received wisdom that replaced such prejudice in the 1960s – that only chirpy

Cockneys and the odd Mummersetter could write properly – never quite took. Working in the London Fringe and Royal Court in those pretend democratic times still meant that if you phoned any radical London Theatre, nine times out of ten the same posh voice was liable to answer. I remember an illuminating exchange in London's then most famous Fringe theatre venue between my Assistant Stage Manager and the Artistic Director of the Theatre. When I asked them how they knew each other, they replied, 'When we were children our parents' estates bordered on each other.'

I remember only too well my own first dismissal by the arty upper middle classes. I was six years old and sitting on the curbside outside my grandmother's slum house halfway up the hill that led to the synagogue. As was usual for me then, I was drawing. A group of bohemian young art students appeared, having been sent out to sketch what they called 'Slum Kiddies'. I was quite talented, but they could not have seen it. They wanted picturesque slum child and that was what they were having. They too had been trained to believe in their own inherent superiority. They too would have chorused, 'You can't teach talent!' My grandmother angrily hauled me inside as she cursed them in Yiddish.

We didn't have flesh-and-blood fathers, us war babies; we had a framed picture of a man in uniform. Every night before I went to sleep I was held up to kiss him goodnight. Getting used to men without the glass in between became a life narrative in itself. The glass-covered image had never inflicted violence on me or resented a child's very existence.

Although I was nicknamed 'Elvis the Pencil' by my father on a non-violent, manic upswing day, his narrative instruction was clear; it concerned my ambition to go to Art School: 'If you start getting any ideas above your station I'll have you in a factory quicker than you can say knife.'

I recently acquired the documents from the London Jewish orphanage in Norwood

recording my Father's acceptance there as a boy aged ten in 1931, even though he had two living parents. His mother, Fanny, my grandmother, who was at that time in her late thirties and the mother of two boys, had been abandoned by her philandering husband, who refused her any maintenance. She was driven to ask the Jewish Orphanage to accept her oldest son after the local Board of Guardians refused her welfare on the grounds that she was young enough to work. Polly, her immigrant mother, refused to look after Moyshe as well as his younger brother whilst Fanny went out to work. Another cluster bomb of narratives was already attached to the main story when I first heard it, presumably injected by my great-grandmother in her own defence, explaining that my father was 'wild', 'uncontrollable', even 'fathering an illegitimate child' and 'keeping a woman in a flat'. He was ten years old in 1931. Even allowing for my father's extraordinary success as a lady-killer, that version doesn't hold water.

*Lesson Four: Facts will not shake a writer determined that they know the real story behind what they want to write.*

In 1946, in order to escape from my grandmother's miniscule house and the housing shortage, we moved into a defunct ballroom. Once a week my father and I would visit another dance school. Reclining on a pink satin bed was a voluptuous blonde in a parachute-silk gown. I was sent into the adjoining toilet with a comic book, and sat for thirty minutes to two hours each week whilst they 'discussed business' and giggled and shushed each other a lot. For forty years it never occurred to me that the 'doing business' story was anything but true. How many times have I had to put scriptwriting students, blinded by their cosseted autobiographical truths, through a gentle third degree to get them to 'see' what would be glaringly obvious to the whole audience. I learned that technique the hard



*My father in France in 1940 (the picture under glass over my cot).*

way – as a forty-year-old suddenly shouting in Kensington High Street Tube Station as the image flashed before my eyes, ‘You bastard – you were shagging her all the time!’ The same image flashed before my eyes in a Bournemouth lodging house, where, after a farcical Jewish funeral that would have made even Mel Brookes fear he had overstepped the boundaries of taste, my deceased father’s current landlady wanted money to pay for the door frame that had to be removed to extricate his stiffened body from his bedsit. I declined to refund her, mainly because she had the same ample and over-displayed crepe cleavage of the ballroom-dancing teacher landlady of the 1940s. I ‘knew’ that he had been paying his rent here the same way as he had back in that dancing school in 1946. I entered the darkness of his tiny room. I put a coin in the meter, and the record player and Al Jolson ground into life: ‘Let them all forsake me – I’ll still have you sonny boy...’

Narrative closure indeed. Or have I made it all up?

**Question: Why do you work mainly in Wales now?**

There was no deliberate choice in my life that led me to mainly work and live in small countries, all of which were or had succeeded in trying to break away from an oppressive master culture that had tried to smother the language of the smaller group with its own ‘spoke’. Israel, Catalonia, Wales. In 1930s Tel Aviv, New German-, Yiddish- or Polish-speaking immigrants were harassed in the streets by young



*My father and his younger brother in 1936; reunited after the orphanage separation.*

fanatical language ‘guerrillas’ shouting ‘Jews speak Hebrew!’

I see now that the cry of the kids at school to me in the 1940s – ‘Fuck off back to Palestine!’ – had subliminally settled in my brain and there I was. ‘Back’ I was not, but I certainly was there. I went on searching for the new Homeland – Spain, Catalonia, Switzerland, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Romania. I worked in all of them. And then, by accident, I came to Wales – and, as I often explain to students, when you get all the background work correct, your story will just fall into place.

To me this is not a country of self-conscious self-dramatisers. There are some such characters, but they are already mythologically dealt with and placed out of harm’s way in the comedy bracket. For this is a country of understanding through the narrative, the tale. Everyone has time for talk, and narratives get exchanged like cigarette coupons. It isn’t just Jews who say, ‘Ask me a question and I’ll tell you a story.’ Or rather, here people don’t say it, and that’s somehow even more satisfying.

The play *The Pessoptimist* by Palestinian writer Emile Habiby is the story of a Palestinian good solider. Neither an optimist nor a pessimist, Saeed is confined in an Israeli psychiatric institution on the eve of Israel’s Independence Day. After an endless series of trials and tribulations, the battered Saeed announces, ‘All I know is that to survive you must write, only write the story of your life...’

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