

Writer development in theatres

I began by proposing to talk about the possible futures for writer development in theatres. I put forward four possible trends as a way of defining some questions for further thought and discussion. These were: **growing diversity; new skills and new approaches; the local and global and developments in the digital sphere ...**

1. **Growing diversity.** Cities such as Birmingham are becoming more and more culturally diverse as well as younger. As audiences grow more diverse they may want different kinds of relationships with theatres, including greater participation in the work. What this might suggest is not just the production of new plays but a kind of “culture of new writing” that embraces the artistic programme, writer development processes, education and outreach etc. The REP’s new writing programme was made possible through increased public funding in the last 10 years. Now the outlook looks bleaker, the temptation may be to cut back on the “riskier” elements of the programme: new writing. Another solution may be to go for more risk; to accentuate “the culture” that makes you distinctive ...

Question 1: What kinds of writer development do we need to respond to these challenges?

2. **New skills and new approaches.** Artistic approaches are diversifying too:-
 - i) Dramaturgs are becoming producers and programmers – a form of “culturepreneurship”, (as coined by Robert Hewison)
 - ii) Writers are becoming dramaturgs: in production, Zinnie Harris for ROAM produced by Gridiron at Edinburgh Airport. Or in the development of other writers, for example, the REPs attachment programme (Lorna French mentored by Laura Wade).
 - iii) Dramaturgs are becoming writers. Collaboration between me and Stan Won’t Dance on SINNER, amongst others ...
 - iv) Writers are becoming performers, drawing on different traditions as well as theatre: performance poetry, stand up, cabaret, hip hop, grime etc. (Shamshad Khan, Francesca Beard, Polar Bear, Yusra Warsawa, Patrice Naiambana, Lemn Sissay etc ...)

Question 2: What new relationships between writers and writing, writing and theatre might be developed in the future?

3. Connecting the local and global.

Young people in particular could be a focus for making real creative connections across cultural divides. I gave examples like the REP’s online playwriting project between Kelly High School in Chicago and St Albans School in Birmingham (two schools where English is mainly a second language ...) and 100 Words Inc., a project to create 100 word

plays by young writers across different countries and languages, inspired by the government order to Beijing taxi-drivers to learn 100 words of English for the Olympics.

Question 3. What other forms of new writing could create meaningful dialogues between different cultures ... ?

4. Developments in the digital sphere

If we try to imagine a future, it is easy to see our anxieties about the world reflected in a culture where everything is better downloaded; where to go to live events, to engage with other people is too risky or too much like hard work. Or maybe live arts will take on greater significance in a digitised world – but will this require new ways of making, delivering and experiencing the live? Net art could give some clues. In addition, projects like Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *The Art of Silence* might indicate that Tate Modern's curators are having more fun than is strictly admissible in high art.

Question 4. In what ways might writers and theatres respond to these new possibilities?

All of this is not to say that the playwright or the single-authored, realistic new play is redundant. Nor that we may still want to watch the same kinds of play in 5 or 10 years time as we do today.

Nevertheless, in the light of these trends, what kinds of future for writer development in theatres do we want? Might it begin to look something like this - or something altogether different?

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May 2007

Further information:-

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication_detail.php?sid=13&id=235&page=5

<http://www.gridiron.org.uk>

<http://www.stanwontdance.com>

<http://www.applesandsnakes.org/artists.php>

<http://www.tribalsoularts.com/>

<http://www.100wordplay.com/>

www.tate.org.uk/netart/theartofsleep