

# Spectacle Theatre

David Adams looks at the history and context of Spectacle Theatre  
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## Spectacle Theatre

David Adams

I used to run a little game with my theatre-criticism students at the University of Glamorgan. Before we got on to the process of criticism, we looked at the contexts of production - funding, patterns of provision, that sort of thing - on the basis that no cultural product exists in a social vacuum, so no one should really be expected to criticise a piece of theatre without knowing something of the prevailing conditions. Students got assigned to half a dozen different theatre organisations representing the range of provision in south Wales, and learned something of their finances, audiences, aims, programmes and so on. We then met together to hear a presentation from each group.

The final part of the exercise was when we looked again at the Arts Council accounts and we became, for a few hours, those (once) all-powerful people who decide on the future of Welsh theatre. The hypothesis was simple (and has been all too true): there is not enough money to go round and something has to go. Each group made a case for their adopted client. Then they all voted. It's a variation on the throwing-out-of-the-balloon/boat game, of course.

I won't be so cruel as to list all the different organisations under consideration, but it tended to be the same organisation which survived and, as in other variations of the game, the winner was a surprise. I'd guess that the overwhelming majority of readers have never seen them, or maybe even heard of them, but they are the one company that students regularly insist should be the priority theatre client for public subsidy.

So what is so special about Spectacle Theatre, a small young people's theatre (YPT) company, specialising in that part of the provision termed Theatre-in-Education (TIE), serving the Rhondda Valleys?

Steve Davis, the company's artistic director since 1990, defined to me what he sees as their essential strength: 'I think the central aspect of Spectacle's work is its consideration of its audience,' he says. 'We aim for all of our work, however complex the ideas contained within, to be accessible.'

**‘We operate primarily from the idea that children and young people have a right to quality theatre experience at least equal to that of adults.’ That’s a credo that is worth reading again, just to have in your minds the passion that motivates a company like Spectacle.**

**To be honest, it is the ‘mission statement’ rather than the work that my students warmed to. And to the company themselves, a committed, unpretentious group of workers based at an FE college at Llwynypia. I suppose if you add together the democratic aims, the friendliness, the commitment, the hard work and the concern for quality then you have a pretty convincing case for support.**

**Why have most of you never seen them? Because you’re not at school any more. You are not the target audience (and, let’s admit it, all cultural product - sorry, art - has a target audience, so let’s not get sniffy about YPT as against classics or experimental theatre). There is, however, no reason why you should not see them and evaluate the experience as rigorously as if it were Clwyd Theatr Cymru, Volcano Theatre or The Torch Theatre Company. You may, however, have to rethink what theatre is.**

**That’s a question that maybe only troubles academics, who have to lead students gently from seeing theatre simply as entertainment to accepting it as a complex shared experience whereby we can try to make sense of our world... and more. It may also be a question that doesn’t always trouble practitioners, but the ‘why’ of their practice is as crucial as the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ - and the ‘for whom’. If it’s for young people, there is somehow deemed to be more of a moral imperative as to purpose and content.**

**‘Theatre,’ insists Steve Davis, ‘is an intensely private and social activity through which children develop a sense of themselves in the larger world. TIE has a distinctive contribution to make to the formation of the child’s self.’**

**When professional theatre was introduced to Wales in the 1960s by the Arts Council, one of the first strategic decisions was to establish a network of small companies that would be based in each of the (then) eight counties of Wales. Spectacle Theatre was founded by the Arts Council and Mid Glamorgan Council in 1979, with a company recruited from three other newly-formed TIE groups, Swansea’s Open Cast, Cardiff’s Action Pie and Gwent TIE. The four original members - Robin Hall, Tim Baker, Jamie Garven and Ros Hutt - were all English-trained actors and, it has to be admitted, for several years after its formation and various changes of personnel, Spectacle suffered from being seen as an English-flavoured company performing to Welsh community audiences with what could be seen as a hint of a patronising political ideology. Spectacle, like many other TIE companies, has mutated over the years, but still retains an ideological core.**

**Crucially, theatre provision in Wales changed when the Arts Council introduced a new drama strategy just as the new National Assembly got itchy to control culture and the resulting conflict became a defining point in the development of Welsh theatre. Some of the victims of the Arts Council’s refocusing were the TIE**

companies. So for a short while Young People's Theatre (YPT) was centre stage, as it were, in the developing debate about theatre practice and provision in Wales. As the Assembly developed its emphasis on young people, accessibility and participation, YPT seemed increasingly to be reclaiming the title it held in the 1970s and 80s, the jewel in the crown of Welsh theatre. Yet I suspect that very few politicians or bureaucrats actually got to see any work. YPT was in many ways no more than a political football.

Ironically, some of the best work I've seen recently has come from TIE/community companies - the very ones the Arts Council drama strategy would have destroyed. And it is not necessarily the curriculum-led devised work that depends on workshops and teachers' packs: Spectacle Theatre, like other TIE groups, can point to an impressive back catalogue of commissioned plays from some of Wales's best writers. The TIE sector commissions most of the new scripts produced in Wales today.

The relationship between the fiery Dic Edwards (whose *Franco's Bastard* brought him notoriety last year) and Spectacle's Steve Davis has yielded a wide-ranging corpus of work of very varied quality. *Moon River*, *The Shakespeare Factory*, *David*, *Kid*, *Vertigo*, *The Freewheelers*, *Over Milk Wood*, *Antigone Now* and *Into the East* encompass a huge range defined by Edwards's concern for language and political idealism and Davis's theatrical intuition and desire to stretch his young audiences. At times the playwright's abstruse arguments were in naked conflict with the director's commitment to accessibility, with the cast trying to make theatre out of wordy hectoring.

But there were also moments of theatrical magic: *Antigone Now*, for example, was an update of Greek myth set in a working-class community in the Rhondda where by the end of the run the company had made an intensely moving, highly intelligent, topical tragedy that totally engaged its young audience. *Over Milk Wood* is a witty sequel to the over-familiar original, following the adventure of Hugh Pugh as he escapes from the charges of murder to America. That the scripts work on the page, too, is evidenced by Seren's and Oberon's publication of several of Edwards's Spectacle commissions.

This isn't by way of an apology for TIE as the main source of new theatre writing in Wales. For a start, when a Welsh TIE company does a scripted play it can be from another country - you are far more likely to sample international playwrights in a TIE production than on the main stage in Wales. Indeed, some of Wales's YPT companies have been at the forefront of internationalism. Jeremy Turner at Arad Goch has initiated a regular Wales International Festival of Theatre for Young Audiences, *Agor Drysau/Opening Doors*, in Aberystwyth; Gwent Theatre had recent hits with *Mirad*, a *Boy from Bosnia* by Adde Bont and Alex Pascall's Wales-Caribbean multicultural storytelling project, *Common Threads*; Theatr Iolo specialises in adaptations of foreign plays - recent productions include Arnold Lobel's *Days with Frog and Toad* and Pauline Mol's *Bison and Sons*; Theatr Powys prides itself on its international development and took part in the *People in Movement* conference in Amman, Jordan, a couple of years ago. Last year Spectacle staged a production in the Parc and Dare, Treorchy, of Hans Kraza's classic children's opera *Brundibar* (the background to Dic Edwards's play *Into The East*).

**One of the most interesting ‘cultural translation’ projects Steve Davis has been involved in, he says, was when he saw a group of Chilean exiles living in Norway present Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* in order to show what it was like living under Allende and Pinochet. His appetite whetted, he has lately forged a collaboration between Spectacle and Trayater Theatre, whose production of *Geweld Nee* he saw performed in Friesian and Dutch. In collaboration with Trayater, Spectacle translated the production into Welsh and English (in versions by Jeremi Cockram and Steve Davis) and toured it throughout south Wales as *Bystanders*.**

**‘The sharing, the exploring of and learning from other cultures is something profoundly human and liberating,’ Davis asserts.**

**That, of course, is a basic tenet of the committed artist, especially those working with communities - and, perhaps, especially so for those working with young people. Davis is not simply a practitioner, he is an advocate and ideologue. He offers a TIE credo:**

**‘We recognise the right of young people to quality arts experience created for young people as they are now...**

**‘We recognise imagination as a force for positive change and that in order to develop the imagination it needs to be exercised through creative play...**

**‘We recognise theatre as a tool for learning...and so on. But he also describes just why TIE is so important.**

**‘Imagine,’ he says, ‘the individual audience member as being represented by a circle with a dot at its centre. The outer circle represents the limits of their experience. We recognise that TIE needs first of all to attract the serious interest of the audience. We engage them by arousing the desire to know. We seek commitment from them through investigation or suspension of disbelief. This level of commitment involves stepping outside their circle and looking forwards and backwards towards the self and others.**

**‘We recognise the importance of relevance in that the audience needs individually and collectively relate the particular theatre experience to themselves and they need to reflect on and evaluate the experience. By expanding the circle for the individual and for the whole audience, we create community.’**

**‘And,’ he concludes, ‘This surely is the function of theatre.’**

**There are those who might argue. But not me - or my students.**