

An Unseen Land

Euros Lewis

While thanking Cwmni Iaith for the invitation to deliver this lecture I must say that the company little realises the risk it has taken. In his foreword to his collection of essays *Moving Into Aquarius*, Michael Tippet says that it is as a musician that he tries to express those eternal things which have to be re-expressed, re-interpreted for every age, and that the content of the book is merely related activity. And although I know full well that the Felin-fach pantomime even at its best comes nowhere near the sublime intellectual ground of *A Child of Our Time* or *Midsummer Marriage*, I have complete empathy with his remark that it is in his artistic creativity that we hear his inner voice speaking.

Despite his crucial social concern, it was as an individual creative artist – a man standing apart – that Tippet responded to the challenge and needs of the world around him. I also try to respond to the challenge and needs of the world around me. But mine is a teacher's role, and as a teacher I also need to be able to stand apart, but only at arm's length. I have no right to leave the classroom, the practice floor or the discussion corner for any length of time. Not even when the class has claimed the topic, or taken complete possession of the project work and is setting about completing their creative product as if totally unaware of my presence. This is the role of the teacher in the community, of course, and as such a teacher my main skills are those of convening the voluntary class, and using the specialist knowledge I have accumulated through years of experience to lead, motivate and stimulate them to embark confidently – borne by their own confidence – on that extreme creative adventure which leads to the land which none of us has ever seen before. You will see therefore that I have neither the status nor the vision of a real artist. Standing in the classroom, being a full member – if slightly different – of the community I serve, is essential to the process of responding together and discovering together. According to the people of Newport in Pembrokeshire, if you can see Carn Ingli mountain it is about to rain, if you can't see Carn Ingli it's already raining. That's the kind of prophet you having standing in front of you this evening, I'm afraid – one who tries to put into words nothing more than that which is evident to everybody within the same creative society, and who doesn't see much beyond the spur of the creative mountain he is currently trying to climb.

Since my perspective is that of the work face, and since I have little experience, let alone confidence, as I try to create objective distance between me and that which I do, I am afraid, if not even paranoid, that what I have to say tonight will, to many of you who are present, if not the majority, be old perceptions. If so, I apologise in advance. The only comfort I have for you is the fact that what I have to share with you contains observations which are key to the route I am trying to plan for that moment, at the end of this term, when I divest myself of my care of Theatr Felin-fach and venture to a land I haven't properly seen yet.

Young or inexperienced writers often ask: where do I begin? The answer of course is in your habitat; with the things you know well, those things about which you can write confidently, in the knowledge that you are as well, if not better informed than anybody else, about the situation, the people, the place.

As an inexperienced lecturer I would be very foolish not to follow my own guidelines. I make no apology therefore for starting this journey in Theatr Felin-fach. At the top of Mynydd Tychrug in fact, that mini mountain which stands like a giant on the landscape of Ceredigion. And in inviting you to climb with me to the top of one of the three summits I am also asking you to trust me as I lead you into a land which is overflowing with stories from the world of myth and magic, as well as firm, solid history. Strange things can happen on this mountain. As mist surrounds us and then disappears only to reappear you will not be surprised to hear that countless people have not only seen the Fair Folk dance here to the accompaniment of pipes, but that some have crossed the boundaries of this visible world to the spell-bound underworld of the little people. (At least, that's what they say!)

But our errand on Tychrug today is not to see the fair folk, but to pay attention to the neighbourhood below, and the place of the theatre in that neighbourhood. Look at it. Notice its position. Among fields. One of a series of agricultural, or semi industrial looking buildings at the centre of this beautiful valley. And wait a minute, the mountain is starting to play its old tricks. Invisible things are beginning to become visible. Look again at the theatre. Notice where precisely it stands: the large Clunderwen Farmers' Co-op warehouse is there on the left. The buildings on the right are the cheese factory and the former MMB creamery; and there, sitting on the fulcrum point, is Theatr Felin-fach, as if trying to balance two cultures, the traditional and the technical-engineering. The old and the new.

Let the heron's flight lead your eyes towards the upper reaches of the Aeron valley, to the little church of Llanbadarn Odwyn, the place, according to tradition, where Thomas Johnes, Yr Hafod took George Friedrich Handel to see the thousands swarming on communion Sunday to sing Hallelujah! in response to Daniel Rowland, the Son of the Thunder's plea to their souls and their hearts. This romantic explanation of the source of the famous chorus is probably not true, but nobody can doubt the historical reality of Llangeitho. The fall-out from the revivalist explosion still penetrates our everyday life. Years after Harris' death, Methodists in Lampeter were still paying preachers to stand on the street corner in Felin-fach to proclaim the five points of Calvinism to whoever listened. Amongst those who didn't listen was the renowned Iolo Morganwg, who would drown the sound of the Calvinists by holding his own meeting with his fellow Unitarians in the nearby farmhouse of Lloyd Jack. The magic of the mountain is working at its best now, enabling you to see the precise significance of this little theatre's situation in the countryside. For here, around the old villages of Ystrad Aeron and Felin-fach, you are looking at the historical front line of the theological war between the old nonconformity and modern Protestantism, between Priestley and Pantycelyn, between the rational free-thinkers and the charismatic hotheads, the anarchic theological Black Spot and the systematic Calvinist Empire; the appeal to reason and the appeal to the heart. The list of opposites is endless, and the tensions eternal. And it is all alive on the nexus of the stage at Felin-fach.

If you still trust me I want you now to meet a group of walkers who are leisurely roaming the mountain. They are people who have newly moved into the area. They can see that the large buildings at the bottom of the valley are factories. But they can't understand what the collection of sheds and mobile rooms next door to them are. When I tell them that there is a theatre they look at me in disbelief. Theatres are for towns and cities they say. They think that the idea of placing a theatre in the middle of the countryside is very charming – it will be a means of bringing culture to the area. In my naiveté I try to explain to them that it is the culture of the area that has caused this collection of sheds to be turned into some kind of theatre. And as they frown in the effort to understand this strange concept I go on to try to excite them with the dynamism and wealth of the religious heritage, as well as tying the past to the present by describing Idwal Jones drawing characters for his Ibsen-like plays from the earth of both cultural sides of the valley below us, the vitality of the golden age of local drama companies in village halls and chapel vestries all over the area; of the contemporary innovativeness of young farmers' groups in the county as they turn

their backs on performing trashy plays and set about adapting, re-writing, and creating their own work.

And although I have given them my full enough version of a rough-guide to the Aeron Valley, experience tells me not to expect too much response. When they have gone, the same feeling as usual will remain: that the most lifelike picture I have succeeded in conveying to them is a Pompeian version of things. Very interesting. Wonderful even. But a picture frozen in a bygone age.

It is my fault of course. If what they have is a picture frozen in time, that is because I froze the picture, because I have prevented the photographic document so full of tension from running its course. And the pictures that are lost are of course the pictures of today. Those pictures include them. They also include you and me. But how can they be set in the same frame, in a picture that will be a meaningful record of the tension of the situation, in a picture that is not affectedly unreal? A picture that will help them to appreciate the true meaning of the landscape over which they are travelling, and their place in the picture. A rather mischievous idea comes to me: why don't I offer to take their picture with that far away island – the one on the horizon – showing over their shoulders. And as I press the camera shutter a flash of light comes from the island – Bardsey, and Simon Glyn's lighthouse.

What I should have done of course was to invite them – and you – to come with me down to the countryside; to come with me from the sheltered and unreal heights of the mountain to the dark depths of the artificial but completely real world of the theatre – to the work face. Today, now.

For five weeks nearly a hundred young people between 11 and 14 years old from the four corners of Ceredigion have been coming together, every Sunday, at Theatr Felin-fach. The group is called Cadw Sŏn (Making a Noise), At first sight, that is precisely what they are doing. But, as we have already seen, first sights can be misleading.

The period when they have been meeting has coincided – almost to the day – with the trouble and row which has arisen following the councillor from Pen Llŷn's comments. Most members of Cadw Sŏn live in the countryside, as do Seimon Glyn's people. Whether they live on a farm or not the rumbling of the agricultural crisis is in their ears. All the historic problems of young people in rural areas – travelling

difficulties, lack of fundamental facilities not to mention exciting ones – as well as the obvious advantages (wealth of environmental heritage) and the less evident (the social networks and the cultural dynamism in particular) are present in Ceredigion as in Pen Llŷn.

Demographically the similarity is striking. With a recent survey conducted by Cered (the Welsh development movement in Ceredigion) showing that one two-teacher village school in the Aeron valley had to cope with up to 14 new pupils during the last school year, it is easy to see how someone who is concerned about the effect this social mobility has on communities which are already tottering under the weight of the agricultural crisis, can identify strongly with the dark picture painted of the demographic landscape of Llŷn and Eifionydd. The vineyard is under siege. What hope is there now of keeping the spring-water clear?

I have brought the incomers I met on the mountain here to the theatre, because in Cadw Sŏn we have noisy and extremely visible evidence of those statistics that place us the indigenous people dangerously near to being a minority in our own territory. But I want you, like them, now to look carefully – much more carefully – at the composition, the flesh and bones, of this unique company. Because what we have here is not a collection of statistics jumping and shouting, arguing and quarrelling, chattering and laughing. And as your ears become familiar with the noise, and your eyes with the unnatural light of the theatrical space, you will see that the picture is not as simplistic as a group of ‘us’ (prospective inheritors of the vineyard) looking at ‘them’ (the prowling dogs). Don’t misunderstand me; this is not a miraculous collection of young people who have set their linguistic and cultural differences aside in the name of a philanthropic homogenous ideal. On a Cadw Sŏn work session day we can’t profess that Felin-fach is a problem free zone. What makes Cadw Sŏn exciting is that they – the ninety-seven of them – are the problem, and the problem in all its complexities.

At the far end of the work area, creating a sequence of movements to the accompaniment of Limp Bizkit (currently king of the English charts) there are two groups of boys, who are, without any doubt, and in spite of their choice of music, uncompromisingly Welsh speaking Welsh. The idioms of their Simpsonic humour are quickly developing into a secret comedy language to be appreciated only by those who share the same youth-culture ideals. And in spite of their confidence they are very aware that they belong to a minority in terms of the broader world.

In the middle of the practice floor there are groups of young girls (11-12years old) developing a series of tableaux to express their ideal Saturday. The work itself is without sound, and therefore without language. But the discussion in the groups varies without control between Welsh and English. In fact the linguistic pattern is not as haphazard as it might seem because many of these young people are from non Welsh speaking families, who have learnt Welsh formally at school, and who have had but little opportunity to use the language in informal crowd situations (such as the Cadw Sŏn sessions). Others come from mixed families, where an in-migrant parent has married a native partner. In these groups of young girls you will also hear children from entirely Welsh speaking homes speaking together in English, some in response to the presence of the non Welsh-speaking girls, others for no apparent reason.

At the front of the stage (directly in front of the part we the teaching team use as our main observation and control point) there is a group of 5 girls who look at least 14 years old (the upper age limit for Cadw Sŏn) if not older. Something about their bearing, their sophisticated clothes (style-wise if not label-wise) which sets them apart. And in fact that is what they are – people apart. They are young people who have only recently arrived in these areas. It is not just houses that are cheaper in rural Wales. The cost of supporting foster parents in these areas is much lower than what the agencies have to pay in large English towns. For the past two or three years an increasing number of these agencies have been turning to rural Wales for a solution to their financial problems. As a result there are a crowd of vulnerable young people who are uprooted not only from their families but also from their urban habitat, from the world they know, and placed in a countryside which is strange to them in all senses. That is why they look two years older than their 12 years – old before their time even. Motivating them to speak Welsh is not a problem. Or rather, that isn't the problem. The challenge for them, and for us as guardians and leaders of this one-day-a-week society is to discover how to enable these 5 to communicate sensibly and meaningfully with each other – in any language.

The show created by the crew was performed on the two days following St David's Day. I have a copy of the programme here. Like the show, the programme design is also the work of the young people themselves. Notice carefully and you'll see that there is something missing: there is no word of thanks for financial help from the Arts Council of Wales. The National Lottery logo doesn't appear anywhere on this

programme. And the simple reason for that is that they haven't supported this enterprise. And the simple reason for that is that we didn't ask them. Why? Why has the response to Simon Glyn's comments from outside the traditionally Welsh areas been so vicious, so uncompromising? For the same reason that we didn't apply for sponsorship from sources outside these areas – because people on the outside don't understand; because the situation is beyond their comprehension; because we do not, in one sense, speak the same language as them.

There is nothing new in this of course. Since the days of the Romans the difference ('otherness' is the word used by the historian Norman Davies) of Celtic culture has been a provocative stone for the colonists' boot. In his volume on the Glyndŵr rebellion Professor Rees Davies mentions, more than once, that the true Welsh cultural and political world was invisible before the rebellion, not only to the foreign English but even to the group of rulers who lived amongst the Welsh. By the eighteenth century, according to John Davies in his volume on the history of the peoples of the Celtic lands for S4C, the English and the French looked upon the peoples of the Celtic lands as 'marginal people, with no connection with the modern world'. To them, we were irrelevant, even if they saw us at all.

And in the year 2001 the world outside insists that Simon Glyn has no right to describe the destruction he, on the inside, sees around him. In the same way it is not possible for us, in rural Ceredigion, to get support from them – the establishment – and at the same time keep our credibility as we tell the truth about the Cadw Sŏn project: in declaring that we are trying to respond positively and creatively in the face of negative social momentum; that we are trying to reverse dangerously destructive factors; that the identity of our indigenous young people is in the balance, and that vulnerable young people from all backgrounds are being placed in unacceptable social situations. We can't mention things like these on application forms because the forms do not allow us to do so. The forms of the Arts Council (and all other funding councils for that matter) can't cope with these unconventional descriptions that illustrate a world which does not conform with the establishment's description of what is nonconformist.

The basic frustration of course is the fact that these external bodies fail to see not just the particular problems of our situation – as marginal people – but that they can't, or do not wish to recognise our wonderful possibilities. I have long been an admirer of the philanthropic Joseph Rowntree Foundation and its efforts to restore lost

communities in the cities and suburbs of England. But they understand nothing of the needs of the rural communities of Wales. They have no conception of the magnitude of the challenge of the day of dual defence (as Saunders Lewis said) – the continuing effort to maintain ageless values, of maintaining a delicate identity on the one hand and building a new radical consensus on the other.

Part of the problem is their misinterpretation - the people on the outside – of the word '*diwylliant*'. Now we, on the inside, by virtue of who we are, understand the word precisely – its implications and its connotations. To put it simply, when we refer to 'us' we are also referring to 'our *diwylliant*.' But go and sit the other side of the table and the view is very different. Oh yes: in Welsh Wales things have a special colour, and there are cultural phenomena – funny little things but harmless enough – which are worth keeping – they could be quite useful to develop for tourists even, if cost effective – and that's it. What the Arts Council's forms, Rowntree's discussion papers, and – yes – the Assembly too (I'm sorry to say) betrays is that to them the English word for '¹*diwylliant*' is culture.

The Arts Council Lottery Board is in the process of investing over three million pounds in buildings to house the arts in Ceredigion. The two organisations in receipt of this big money are the Aberystwyth Arts Centre and Theatr Mwdan in Cardigan. I do not think I am saying anything particularly controversial when I say that neither place is renowned as the natural home of indigenous *diwylliant*, that neither place is a centre which informs and nurtures our indigenous creativity. But if you ask the Lottery people what *diwylliant* they have supported in Ceredigion they will look at you in surprise. They will not understand the question. Even if you asked the question in English.

On a theatre stage or television screen, it would be possible to illustrate this abyss between us and them by means of two characters; a doctor and a patient. They are the doctor. We are the patient. The first paragraph of the treatment would be: a patient, from a remote farm in the depths of the countryside, has insisted on seeing the doctor. He lists very strange symptoms complaining of a headache, heartache, and weakness in the marrow of his bones. He gets little response and no sympathy from the doctor. At the moment we do not know whether the doctor lacks patience or

¹ *Diwylliant* – corresponds to culture – has connotations of pride, belonging and intimacy. Di (neg prefix) + gwyllt (wild) = dewild...

the ability to recognise the patient's illness. Having described his condition and having had no response the patient makes his way home – to recover or to die?

But this isn't a contrived film. Cadw Sŏn and the needs of its young members is a real situation, as is the situation in Pen-llŷn. And if the patient has not used the correct terms to describe his condition, and it is evident that he is not being taken seriously by the authorities, then we are in danger of accepting the diagnosis that our illness is not as serious as all that; that our society is not completely fit perhaps, but that its condition is not as grave as that of Ebbw Vale or Llan-wern. What right do we have therefore to make a noise, while people who are really ill need attention? And that is the final irony of this real drama: that we are in danger of accepting the second class status even of our own extinction.

But drama is not tragedy to the Cadw Sŏn crew. Their youth-culture adrenalin ensures that creative energy penetrates to all parts of the society they create. The obvious signs are their willingness, indeed their natural tendency to question and experiment, not to accept the situation as it is, to step beyond the boundaries set for them by the ever present Them (we the adults in this case) on the outside.

Coleridge suggests that the purpose of culture in society is to release the potential of those elements that permeate our humanity – that it is man's effort to improve his world, to realise a better world, that is at the core of the ²culturing process.

At the end of the third Sunday of working, as we watch the tired crew leaving the theatre we remember the great development there was at the beginning of the afternoon when the new-comers agreed to develop a spontaneous scene side by side with a group of mixed language girls from the Aberystwyth region. At the end of the day we had a character creating session. The aim was to create a character that would represent their aspirations, as a group. The portrait notes of the London girls describes a character called Caz (full name: Cerys Jones), 14 years old, who lives in a big house in the country, and is the daughter of Dan (non-Welsh speaking Irish) and Gwen (local Welsh speaker). Notice: Caz is not a cosmopolitan girl from the middle of the Large City. Neither is she monoglot English. She is a country girl, and speaks two languages – English and Welsh. There is no longer any doubt what these girls' aim is: the same as that of every member of the group: to belong.

² Diwyllio – a transitive verb best translated as to culture, or to civilize.

This was made evident through dialogue. The creative process, the essence of culture, facilitated, motivated, released the dialogue and created the language which permitted the message to be understood. This is culture at work.

Screaming in our pain, drawing attention to our illness, is a natural action, if not an inevitable part of the process of telling others that we are still here, of confirming our existence. But there is negative energy in the scream too, and there is a real danger that that element will divert our attention towards the outside, that the little energy left to the patient will be wasted in calling to the doctor, in complaining about the Health Service, in creating a nuisance of ourselves in the local surgery. Not that there isn't a need to do so of course in order to remind them of our presence, our rights and their responsibilities.

But to channel our energy in that direction only means that we are reaffirming our second class status, reaffirming our lack of confidence, confirming the fact that we are a colonised people and that we accept that we do not have the ability to change our own fate in our own territory; in this we reaffirm the root of our illness, namely our own lack of confidence – each one of us, individually, socially and nationally.

This is not the first time we have been in this situation. Glyndŵr's feat was to turn the invisible underground society of the Welsh into a credible, confident reality – people who respected themselves, and thereby commanded the respect of their opponents. It was common values – language and culture – that kept the national flame at low-burn through that dark, invisible, period, and it was the cultural heritage that was the main source of the wondrous energy of the rebellion which demolished the boundaries. Cultural means were crucial to the armaments of Glyndŵr and his fellow leaders. It was no surprise therefore, in planning the future of the new nation, that their main ambitions, their key ambitions, were cultural ambitions.

Three centuries later there was another revolution. Harris' and Rowland's revolution; both responding to their fellow Welsh people's crisis by giving them the means to improve themselves in the most meaningful way possible, lifting their servile eyes from the mud, and moving the focus of social responsibility from the external Them to the individual himself, the inner person, in relation with the society of experience that succoured him; while inviting everybody – every member of society without exception – to board the ship of the great adventure, and to develop together the vision that

would decide the course that would lead them, with a confidence and certainty that nobody could deny, towards the land that nobody had seen.

Without doubt, the Great Revival was a massive national revolution, drawing on all the media of cultural heritage, and exciting them again to release the positive energy of the creative mind to give every individual a purpose, society an aim, and a direction to the whole nation.

Although neither the Arts Council, nor the Rowntree Foundation, nor the Assembly officers – they on the outside – can do that, in our Welsh speaking communities that cultural heritage is still alive. We therefore have the means of curing ourselves. Indeed if we want to be truly fit, really free, it will be our responsibility and privilege to recognise our creative potential, to release those cultural means that were bequeathed to us, in order to cure ourselves, to cure society, and to cure all who belong to it. For the sake of the culturally confident boys at the back of the practice room, the linguistically uncertain girls in the middle of the floor, and – yes – for the sake of Cerys Jones (14 years old): the Caz of the future.

Euros Lewis

Lecturer in Charge, Theatr Felin-fach

March 2001