

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee
Cyllid Celfyddydau nad yw'n Gyhoeddus / Non-public Funding of the Arts
CWLC(5) ART01
Ymateb gan Adam Somerset / Evidence from Adam Somerset

Status

I am the author of 620 reviews and commentary pieces on theatre and performance in Wales dating back to 2007. I have seen more performance than any other audience member in Wales and my writing in aggregate is larger than that of all print media combined.

I belong to no organisation other than to be a member of the panel that determines the nomination and winners for the Wales Theatre Awards. I am not familiar enough with opera and dance so these observations refer to theatre in its broadest manifestation.

Summary

Wales has a theatre of a quality and a scale that belies its size. No community of three million in the world has a larger. It is a record in which all concerned should take pride, makers and government equally. However, its fuller flourishing is held back by conditions that are well known and been repeated ad nauseam for decades.

A comatose and fragmented media, some answerable to a senior management elsewhere, puts the lid on critical response and public debate. As in other areas entrepreneurial spirit, zeal and managerial competence are high but Wales lacks the structural mechanisms for its full enablement. In the name of solidarity to the national project nostalgia and the selective editing of history pervade the arts to its weakening. The culture is ill-at-ease with modernity. The tourist interest is a strong influence on arts decision-making.

Open markets are an apparatus that need strong law to corral deleterious effects. But the qualities of innovation and energy hold small esteem in the culture. The best historians of Wales lament on public platforms that the great capitalists of the Welsh primary industries are treated in a one-sided manner. Their engineering and technological achievements play no part in the cultural memory, being subsidiary to monochrome record of class antagonism. Art reflects the soil of culture in which it grows and culture is deep and entrenched. This nature of the culture of anti-commercialism weakens the art. Government has small influence when set beside it.

Aesthetics and aesthetic discussion constantly change. A strand of theory, with its roots in the Academy, takes pride in the smallness of audience it is able to attract. The esoteric appeal is interpreted as indicator of quality, the adjective "challenging" elevated to signify the inducement of boredom. Public bodies themselves are part of culture and not immune from fad and fashion.

The most insightful comment on the culture was written by Daniel Evans for opendemocracy.net on 22nd December 2016. "A final corollary of this invisibility– it is not just the news media: dramatic portrayals of Welsh life remain largely invisible in film, music and literature – is that it contributes to an extremely weak sense of national identity in Wales."

Performance in Wales

To be an audience member in Wales is a privilege. There is no national community in the world of three million that offers a similar abundance of companies and quality. Cardiff has more venues– WMC, the Other Room, Chapter, the New Theatre, the Richard Burton, the Sherman – than any city in Britain outside London.

Even in a comparable culture of public subsidy for the arts the range and quantity of performance in Cardiff is, for instance, greater than that in Sydney, New South Wales, a metropolitan area ten times its size.

However, the benefit for the consumer comes at a cost. The producers of performance have levels of income that are low and patterns of earnings that are unstable. Careers for actors have the advantage of the proximity of London and for those who are bilingual the production projects of S4C is a career-enhancer. That is not the case for directors and dramatists.

A discussion this summer by the association for directors concludes that a career as a director in Wales is untenable. This is in part because of directors from England, with the National Theatre cited as opting for a high proportion of non-Welsh directors. This is not reflected in the quality, nor the earning capacity, of productions. In 2016 and 2017 the national company's role in the Theatre Awards has been peripheral.

Theatre in Wales has squandered the talents of its most talented writers. Gary Owen alone has over the course of many years become the sole voice, with a reliable distinctiveness, who can sell out a theatre.

The spirit of entrepreneurship is evident across Wales. Cardiff's the Other Room, the winner of multiple awards, is a result of sheer entrepreneurial will. In Blaenau Ffestiniog Opra Cymru is testimony to similar entrepreneurial drive whereby audience appeal links to high quality.

It is notable that the theatre that takes Wales to the world tends to come from the entrepreneurial wing rather than the revenue-funded one. For example Dirty Protest and Scriptography have taken productions to the most prestigious and influential fringe venues in London. Flying Bridge Theatre has performed on both coasts of the USA and was at Adelaide this year, the biggest theatre festival in the world after Edinburgh.

Role of Arts Council of Wales

The Arts Council of Wales had a period of turbulence at the beginning of the century. To the observer the board and management in the period that followed gave the impression of having performed the role admirably. The Chair up to 2016 was a public figure who spoke unafraidly for the arts.

Since the demand for subvention will always be greater than the resources to supply, the record will always be contestable. In England controversy always centres on the monies given to London versus the rest of the country. The Council in Wales has avoided for instance the like of the protest this month against its equivalent in England. (A debate, of some bitterness, has centred on a start-up company receiving £2m.)

However, the Council is a public sector grant allocation body. An open letter in 2003 signed by 60 directors and writers asked for a strategic approach to theatre (1). Most of the authors' comments are pertinent in 2017. However, the Council is not a strategy-making body nor is it a venture capital operation picking winners. It has to be added that if it were a winner-picker on a VC model then the sales revenues for theatre would soar. But sales maximisation is not its brief and nor should it be. To its credit the balance of allocation across the counties of Wales, the languages and the art forms invites none of the rancour of comment in England or Scotland.

Lastly, the Council is also an outlet for government policy as a whole. Social policy is at its heart but there is evidence of some muddle in its application. (2)

Contrasts with England

It is pointless to make direct comparison with London since the city is a phenomenon out of kilter with the rest of the four nations. However, two factors are relevant. Firstly, its theatre has always had a public-private symbiosis in which subsidised productions enter the commercial sphere. Indeed the record from the 1980s is clear that theatre practitioners acquired considerable personal wealth without putting any of their own capital at risk. The National Theatre in its recent years has taken pride in its capacity to sell, its highest earner having taken £40m at the box office. There is no obvious evidence of a similar aspiration to sell in Wales.

The ecology of venues is of course vastly different in Wales. However, it is feasible for private-sector theatre to exist with the right product. Frapetsus is evidence, being able to fill theatres from Colwyn Bay to Cardiff. However, since it required extreme financial risk from its entrepreneur-actor-writer it has ceased.

The second factor is an inquisitive press. Thus Richard Morrison of the Times looked to the subsidy for one mismanaged company and then to its number of performances. He divided the two and published his result,

£148,000 per performance. No such exercise exists in Wales.

Theatr Clwyd has this season broken with a tradition of coyness about revenue. Its brochure contains in large print its record for the year. 158,337 tickets sold, £1.6m ticket sales. It stands out for its very rareness.

Factors for Revenue Growth

Every industry sector considers itself to be unique which is true. All sectors have their particularities but all have their commonalities. In particular commercial success is about brand-building. In England this summer a new play by James Graham was an instant sell-out with transfer to the West End.

A play by Graham is a known entity and the audience knows what it is getting. His play "This House"- the only play in theatre to feature a young Dafydd Elis-Thomas- has longevity also being revived last year with commercial success. Revivals are rare in Wales- again Gary Owen is the only example.

Similarly this summer the National Theatre in England has combined playwright Lucy Kirkwood with the detective from "Broadchurch", the result an instant sell-

out. Brand quality, a repertoire of familiar actors, seasonal regularity are all part of the mix, achieved at Theatr Clwyd and developed with success at the Sherman.

The irregularity of the appearance of theatre companies is not good for brand-building. A company like Waking Exploits is there for three years and then gone. Opra Cymru builds a franchise with audiences of 150–200 and then is no more to be seen.

Welsh-Language Theatre

I am not an expert in this strand having seen some, but not all, of the productions of Arad Coch, Bara Caws, Cwmni Franwen, Opra Cymru and Theatr Genedlaethol. The five artistic directors hold my respect for work that spans the spectrum from good to outstanding. Their capability for sales growth is constrained by the fact that surtitling, a regular in opera, is still unfamiliar for theatre audiences.

National Theatre of Wales

National theatre holds a particular place in the theatre ecology. It sits at the centre. There is no choice in the issue. When the late Rhodri Morgan gave his valedictory lecture for the Wales Political archive he was asked as to the stages of government in Cardiff Bay. The first period, he said, had one purpose that over-rode all; it was the legitimisation of the Welsh Assembly Government as an institution.

So with the national theatre; its first chapter was one of unsurpassed brilliance in establishing its existence. Critical praise for the music of Wales has long been a regular. To open a broadsheet and see a five-star review for theatre of Wales, as I did in August 2010, from Britain's best theatre critic had no precedent.

The brilliance has not been sustained. The signs of pathology of corporate decline are well-known and the national company exhibits four of them. A public company cannot go bankrupt in the manner of a private company. The view from an outsider at a hundred miles distance differs from that of Cardiff. Regulatory capture is a well-known phenomenon. With sadness it is hard for an outsider not to discern the signals, from the public record at least, that this has been the case.

CONCLUSION

The economics of performance are no different from other products. There is a fixed cost that is amortised over production runs with variable cost. In the case of theatre it is the rehearsal and preparation time amortised over the number of performances. At the height of the repertory system the two were merged; the

companies prepared the following week's production during the day before performance in the evening. In terms of cost minimisation the system adopted by Cameron Mackintosh, the world's most successful theatre entrepreneur, is the same as that of the Macdonalds Corporation.

In Wales the company with a regular best ratio of fixed cost to number of performances has been Frapetsus. It stands out as a commercial operation. At the opposite end public sector theatre in 2017 can be observed to have a ratio of five weeks rehearsal and other activities resulting in three performances.

Theatre is a medium for dramatists and actors. They are brand names. Tickets rise when a familiar name is the draw. Look only to the pantomime offered by the New Theatre each winter whose audience extends to Pembrokeshire. Innately strong products and focus and investment on a selected number of existing and up-and-coming performance names are the routes to raising the ratio of earned income to public sector grant-giving.

Notes and References

1. Open letter– http://www.theatre-wales.co.uk/critical/critical_detail.asp?criticalID=153
2. A document of advice to companies stresses attention to the most impoverished communities both materially and culturally. It suggests experimental work, the exact opposite of what such communities deserve. The bedrocks of theatre are comedy and theatre. An aesthetic of snobbery dislikes these genres, the holders usually lacking in skill to make them.

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