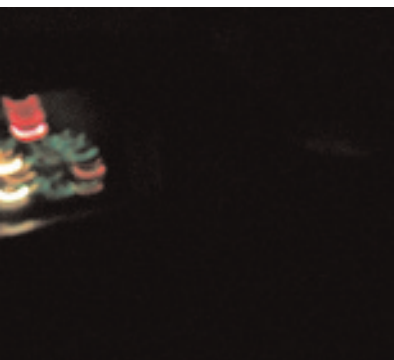


Father Figures

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Gary Owen reveals the genesis of his recent short play, tracing its progress from a ghost story to YouTube to a London stage

Father Figures is a short piece I wrote for the Tristan Bates Theatre in London which exemplifies two tendencies in my recent work. The first is an apparently artistically self-effacing interest in creating work from the words of others, rather than from words of my own. The second is a seemingly more assertive insistence that the way in which actors deliver my lines should reflect the way I place words on the page.

(i) The Words of Others

Verbatim theatre – in which plays are constructed entirely using the precise words as they were originally spoken by individuals involved in an event or situation – has been all the rage in British theatre for the last five years or so. By now it's a little bit passé – and so I am

careful to say that the work I am doing at the moment is 'based in oral history' rather than being verbatim theatre. I first became interested in work that is based in oral history when I was commissioned to write a play for Radio Wales in 2004. My commission was part of a season called *Plays for Wales*. At the time, a massive pipeline was being built across Pembrokeshire to reach the LPG facility at Milford Haven. I suggested a play about the people whose lives this epic piece of civil engineering would cut through, and I headed west armed with notebooks and a dictaphone, not at all sure what I would come up with, or in fact whether I would come up with anything.

The resulting play, *In the Pipeline*, was an unexpected delight. It drew on conversations overheard on public transport, old bits of family history, anecdotes related in pubs, slightly unnerving encounters in Canaston Woods, and stories that were passed on to me via friends of friends as people became aware I was wandering around Pembrokeshire on the hunt for material. And the delight was unexpected, because while I knew full well that the verbatim theatre movement was creating work out of the experiences of disgraced politicians, serial-killer doctors and prisoners of war, it was a shock to find I could make work from the experiences of my dad, my grandmother, my aunty Gwyneth and the ticket collector on the 8.12 from Cardiff to Pembroke Dock.

Prompted by this first taste of work based in oral history, I applied for and got a grant from the Arts Council of Wales to do some research into how I might incorporate more verbatim material into my writing. I headed west again – this time trading in my dictaphone for a video camera – and began doing something closer to formal interviews with members of my family, mostly about their experiences as children growing up on a small family farm.

It was while driving home with my dad one night that I heard the story which became the middle part of *Father Figures*. It's a very simple tale, barely a couple of minutes in the telling. I'd asked my father about having spotted a UFO once, and had switched on the camera to capture his response. He was pretty dismissive of the flying saucer, but went on to tell me about seeing a sort of ghost. (The resulting clip can be seen on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLGKX2zUFhM>.) My dad had been walking from the cowshed back towards the farmhouse when he saw a distinct white shape floating up the lane towards the farm gates. The story made an impression on me straightaway, even as my father told it – but it was only later, while transcribing his words, that I was struck by a detail which had escaped me in the moment. Almost the first thing my dad said was that this incident had happened while his own father was in hospital, critically ill following a brain haemorrhage. This detail adds

a layer of meaning to the story which makes it more than simply a spooky anecdote – but at the time, I had taken it as being mere scene-setting. I'm convinced that had I recalled the tale from memory, this vital detail would have slipped my mind, because I mentally tagged it as being inessential, even before I knew what the full story was.

This small incident shows the power of a verbatim approach to creating work. When someone speaks to us, what they say reaches us through the filter of our expectations about what this sort of person might say to us in these sorts of circumstances. Nothing we do can overcome this filtering process – in fact, as linguists and philosophers of language have shown, to overcome it entirely would be to abandon the conventions of speech which make communication possible. But by recording a speaker's words and then transcribing them exactly, I give myself another opportunity, in a very simple but powerful way, to hear what a person has actually said – as opposed to what I expect this person or this sort of person to say, in these sorts of circumstances. And this gives me a chance, as a writer, to go beyond myself. I can create work about characters who contradict my expectations of them. I can create work about characters who are not just beyond my experience, but beyond my imagination.

(ii) Putting Words on a Page

My first play, *Crazy Gary's Mobile Disco*, was written in isolation from any sort of theatrical tradition, in Aberystwyth. It consists of three monologues that tell the story of a difficult night in an unnamed south Wales town from three different perspectives. When the play began to get me meetings with new writing companies in London, I was told that monologues had been all the rage in British theatre for the last few years, but were now passing out of fashion. A residency at the National Theatre Studio allowed me to pillage the National's vast library of plays and do some remedial reading.

As I struggled to catch up with theatrical fashion, it struck me that many of the writers who became my favourites took a great deal of care with how they placed text on the page. David Harrower and Linda McLean, for example, break sentences into lines of a few words each, as if they are writing not straightforward speech, but a kind of free verse. Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp make use of punctuation in a way that goes beyond grammatical necessity, exerting control over rhythm and sense.

I began paying attention to the arrangement of text immediately, and discovered – as poets have known for thousands of years – that it allowed me to say more, with less. Last year the Tristan Bates Theatre asked me to come up with a piece that would require close collaboration with an actor. I decided to write a short piece, and to

suggest that the delivery of the text reflect its arrangement on the page. My actor was the brilliant Danny Sapani. He and the incredibly talented director, George Perrin, were willing to indulge me. Danny read the piece, observing the shape of the text, marking line breaks with a pause, or a change of tempo, or a change of tone, or a change of thought. The effect was astonishing. Something very like the character I had written was there, from the first cold reading.

(iii) Getting Them Said How You Want Them

So why has it taken me seven years from when I first began to play with the form of text on a page to get the result I had been looking for? Part of the answer is that when I began working as a playwright I was a complete newcomer to theatre and didn't have the nerve to insist to more experienced practitioners that they should just say the words the way I'd written them. Another part of the answer is that in Welsh theatre we are just not very good at handling text with a great deal of precision. You can work with spacing, line breaks and punctuation as hard as you like and typically, your work will be ignored. I think there are two reasons for this.

First, most of us who work in Welsh theatre also work in TV. Television and theatre are both dramatic forms, and the close relationship between the two leads us to miss the crucial differences between them. In particular, we make the mistake of thinking that TV dialogue is more or less the same kind of thing as dialogue in a play. But dialogue is just one means by which TV tells a story – it is the icing on the cake. Dialogue in theatre is the flour, the eggs, the sugar and the heat in the oven. A cake can do without icing, and still be delicious. Mess around with the key ingredients, though, and you're heading for trouble. TV – simply because there is so much of it – is where most of us spend the larger portion of our working lives. When we move from TV to theatre and fail to recalibrate our sense of how the lines before us work, then we are doomed to produce theatre that is just a live version of the worst possible television.

Second, within the academic wing of the Welsh theatrical community, there's been a hostility to the whole notion of theatre based on a text that represents the intentions of an author. Text-based theatre has been characterised as belonging to an alien tradition, an authoritarian 'English model' of theatre, which we should abandon in favour of a theatre based in devised work and performance, and which would be more 'authentically Welsh'. These arguments are so vague as to be almost meaningless, and I suspect they have been deployed not because they are believed, but because it is assumed they help practitioners and researchers of performance-based theatre compete for funding with the allegedly culturally colonised

practitioners of text-based theatre.

Despite the weakness of these arguments against text, I believe their flavour has permeated our theatre culture. They have licensed a slackness and lack of precision in the handling of text. It is common in our rehearsal rooms that after an initial read-through, actors close the script, lean back from the table, and wonder whether, say, such and such a character might be gay. And they look for answers not in the text itself, but in their own recollections of some guy, once, who turned out to be gay when everyone thought he was just a bit camp. The specific detail of character I have worked to make unique is obscured by a consensus over what certain types of people are probably like, according to the group's experience. Apparent contradictions in the text are taken to be 'mistakes', rather than indicators of contradictions within characters. That which seems implausible, or unlikely, or difficult, is all too often ironed out by the rehearsal process, producing characters who are generalised, 'sympathetic' and unmemorable.

When I am making theatre based in oral history I am trying to put aside my expectations and take for granted that people are more extraordinary than I can imagine. When I work outside Wales, I find that actors and directors take for granted that a play will be something they need to engage with, wrestle with and learn from. This sort of respect is much harder to find at home. We do not expect our playwrights to be brilliant. And – what a relief! – most often, it turns out they are not.

An extract from *Father Figures*

Part 2 – The Lane

I told you about what I seen in the lane one night, that frightened me?

I have told you.

This was when father was in hospital,

After he'd had his brain haemorrhage.

I was at home on my own doing the milking

And

We had the two outside lights, one
On the end of the house exactly the same as they are now,
One up on the sheds.
And I'd put all the lights out in the sheds.
I was coming down.
And as you walk you know from the sheds down to the house
You pass the entrance to the lane.
I had the dog with me, Jack Russell,
Can't remember if it was a he or a she now, we had a few.
The dog was standing, looking down the lane, growling.
I got there I could see a shape: I thought,
God is that, a cow or something that's got out?
The dog was growling, getting agitated.
I was looking at this shape
And it wasn't on the ground.
You could see space between the shape and the ...
It was floating.
And it was coming slowly up the lane.
I was looking at it, I thought –
I had no idea, I couldn't make it out
I was beginning to get a bit you know

Nervous.

And when I looked down,

The dog had gone.

He was disappearing round the back, trying to get into the house,

And animals have got – you know, they're sensible things.

And by this time now I was crapping my pants

This ... was getting closer and closer

And I still couldn't make out what it was.

It looked like

A small cloud of mist, that was moving,

It looked like

Say you'd put a couple of cats in a big white sheet

There was that sort of

Movement to it.

As I say I was crapping myself by this time.

Course when the dog disappeared that was enough for me.

I was gone, in the house, into the dairy.

Shotgun, two cartridges down the barrels,

And I went upstairs and was looking out the window

Expecting to see whatever this was coming up, you know, the lane.

But I never seen it again.

I don't know what happened.

It never came past the house, and

I never went out to see what it was.

I told you, I know I did, but I didn't tell anyone then.

Once you've calmed down you think

Well that was a bit fucking silly.

So when everyone came home from the hospital I didn't say a thing.

Just asked how father was.

Mother said,

Still wandering.

Gary Owen is currently completing his second play for the Watford Palace Theatre, and will soon start a new play, co-commissioned by the Hampstead Theatre and Theatr Clwyd. He will then begin a substantial oral history project funded by a Creative Wales Award, which will result in a large-scale verbatim play about contemporary Wales. For further details, see the enclosed free Creative Wales DVD.