

## Round table on present British theatre

Stella Feehily, Max Stafford-Clark, Phil George

**Stella Feehily:**  
Playwright

The perennial problem for a playwright is having started a career – *how do you sustain it?*

I came to writing late and before that had been working for seven years as an actress in Dublin. From time to time, I worked with an Improvisation group and had enjoyed the extra creative element of making up dialogue and monologue on the spot. Writing seemed only footsteps from that improv work.

My first play *Duck* was a co-production with Out of Joint Theatre Company (Max Stafford-Clark's company) and the Royal Court Theatre. The play toured nationally and to Ireland. Venues included a month at The Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh Festival, a month at the Abbey Theatre as part of The Dublin Theatre Festival and then five weeks at the Royal Court Theatre.

The play is about two troubled teenagers Cat and Sophie. Both have a taste for alcohol and violence but Sophie uses education as a form of escape while Cat (the protagonist) uses her sexuality to escape her dead-end life.

The play had been accepted by the various theatres involved in touring and coproduction without my meeting any of them,

so I was a little taken aback when one literary manager (who had championed the play) after meeting me said, 'But she's old.' I was thirty-two at the time. In fairness to the Literary Manager it was a play about teenagers so indeed why wouldn't it be written by a 19 year old? However –it made me think about attitudes to age and career– in particular attitudes to female playwrights.

In the UK we've seen the rise and rise of the young female playwright and that's as it should be. There are a number of cracking writers under thirty –including Polly Stenham, Lucy Prebble, Ella Hickson who have all jostled their way to attention– but media attention seems often to focus on –*wow*– young and photogenic.

Brains, brilliance and no wrinkles. Amazing.

I don't think I've ever seen such articles about up and coming male playwrights.

I'm not suggesting any literary manager worth their salt would dismiss a female writer over the age of 29 but I did wonder –if this champion realized I was an ancient thirty-two and not nearer the age of the teenagers I was depicting– would they really have been as keen to get behind the play? They were suddenly unable to say –they'd discovered the 'New Young Thing but the 'Relatively Non-Ancient Thing'. Hardly a selling point.

And all theatres face the problem of getting audiences in to see new work.

They are desperate to find the angle that will garner print coverage, radio interviews and so on, so that the new writing can attract an audience.

Aside from that, playwrights, regardless of gender or age, face the same problem after the first few plays have been produced *How to keep going*. How do you make a living when what interests is the shock of the new? Of course there are

many playwrights who transcend this –David Edgar, a case in point.

But my understanding leads me to believe that the energy and resources in the leading new writing companies seem to be very involved in finding “the next big thing” –the ever younger– rather than developing and nurturing the talent that's already there.

I've had the absolute luxury of working with Out of Joint on three of my plays. One of the many brilliant aspects of working for them is that they are an internationally renowned touring company. They always play at a London theatre as well as touring nationally and regularly tour internationally.

The usual set up in British theatre is a four to five week rehearsal and then a four to five week run in the theatre. When a play tours it reaches a much wider audience and the writer has a chance to make some money from royalties and of course the play text is sold at these venues also. Not that you make a fortune on play texts but the play is out there for others to take up.

I've had the luck of playing at Edinburgh during the Festival. That's a great way of reaching an international audience. After my play *Duck* was seen there it was produced in Australia, New Zealand, Serbia, Italy, Sweden, and Germany.

The same opportunity is afforded by having a production at the Royal Court Theatre –it introduces you to not only a loyal and diverse London audience but an international audience which closely follows the work.

I have no personal complaints about getting work out there because I've had a tremendous amount of support but that is just not so for many.

I'm well aware that writers who perhaps have spent up to two years writing a play must make do with a four or five week run and no more.

My dear friend J.T. Rogers –the American playwright who wrote *The Overwhelming* which Max directed at the National Theatre and at the Roundabout Theatre, New York– said, as we looked at a line of people queuing to see his show, «Thank God. I'll never have to do that job where I dress as a chicken again».

J.T had had ten years of bursaries, workshops, productions without décor, readings, awards but never a major production of any of his plays. That experience is not uncommon in American theatre. You may have awards coming out of your armpits but it doesn't necessarily mean anyone is going to do your work. But The National Theatre's seal of approval enabled J.T. finally to have a career in America.

As for the current state of Irish theatre –well, not having lived there for five years– I feel I can't really talk with authority but I can say that it seems to be in better health than when I left in 2005.

One of the reasons I looked to London was because its new writing scene seemed so healthy and there was such incredible variety. New writing was only really beginning to take off in Dublin and to top that very few female playwrights were being produced. I wanted to see a different kind of play than what was on the Dublin stages.

But I'm told that there's now more of an appetite for new writing and certainly there seem to be more female playwrights on the scene. Lucy Caldwell, Rosalind Haslett, Abbie Spallen, Elaine Murphy.

The difficulty is that, in Ireland, we think that we are so much bigger than we really are, but in fact the population of the Republic of Ireland is in the region of 4.5 million people. The city of London has a population of 8 million or thereabouts.

So, there's not really the market to sustain a writing career in Ireland alone. That's why an Irish playwright has to look to London or New York to make a living.

A phenomenon I've noticed in both British and Irish theatres is the development and growth of the Outreach and Education departments. When Max and I go to the various venues with touring productions, invariably that department has the most staff and, though it's terribly difficult to remember everyone's names and job title, I think it's a very positive development –teaching young people about the shows they've seen, organizing workshops by practitioners– post show discussions. I recently taught a writing workshop at Barton Perveril School near Southampton. The Education department at the Nuffield Theatre Southampton is very dedicated and the young people at this particular school see a lot of the work and participate in many post show discussions and workshops with visiting practitioners.

The first question I asked the young people (who were aged between 16 and 18) was 'What is your favourite play? And why?'

One student said the work of Martin Crimp –because of the spareness and strangeness of the writing. Another said *Spring Awakening* –vibrant and visceral– another said Mark Ravenhill's *Pool (no water)* because of the intriguing subject matter. Another student said *Othello* because of the beauty of the language, while a number of the students said they loved *Mixed up North*, which had just had a short run at the Nuffield. A play by Robin Soans directed by Max Stafford-Clark about young people and mixed relationships set in Burnley. The play features discussions on racism and Islam, mixed marriages, incest, gang violence, teenage promiscuity and teenage drinking.

They said they loved it «because the play tells it like it is».

I was impressed by the students' passionate and articulate response to my questions and reassured –reassured that theatre still has the power to move and “tell it like it is”. And what a vibrant art form it continues to be!

And of course these school children are our future audience.

### **Max Stafford-Clark. Theatre Director:**

I want to start with a story that indicates how singularly and oddly English theatre has evolved. Out of Joint were touring in Russia with a Caryl Churchill play, *Blue Heart*, and in St Petersburg I was asked to do a workshop at the Drama Academy with some directing students. Now at Out of Joint we organise a great number of workshops, so perhaps I didn't approach this one with significant circumspection. In any event, the workshop was a disaster. None of the games and exercises I suggested seemed to have any relevance or pertinence to the young Russians, and soon we abandoned all pretence of work and it became a simple Question and Answer session.

The first question they asked was «What masters have you studied under?» I explained that when I was young there was no formal system of apprenticeship, and although Hilton Edwards (for the Gate Theatre, Dublin), Tom O'Horgan (of the La MaMa, who directed the first production of *Hair*) and Bill Gaskill (my predecessor at the Royal Court) had all been extremely influential, I hadn't formally studied under any of them. This provoked a storm of tut-tuts and disbelief. The next question concerned the concept of the play. With what concept had I approached it? I explained that I was a bit suspicious of “concept”; that the concept was perhaps the cart, but the play was the horse, and you first had to catch the horse and put it between the shafts before you could have an idea of what the

“concept” was. This laborious metaphor left all of us confused, but the next question seemed more straightforward. “How long do you rehearse for in England?”, I said four weeks was the norm, but this particular play had had five. This answer seemed to confuse them more than ever. After a pause, the interpreter said they didn't understand my response. Had I intended to say four months or four years? Finally, they asked how much actors were paid in England. I said that the Equity minimum was £300 a week but that these actors were paid £330. This response provoked a spontaneous and sustained peal of laughter. It transpired that a senior drama professor was paid \$250 a month. So they knew English theatre was without any serious intellectual foundation, hideously amateurish in its preparation and obscenely overpaid.

The rest of the workshop didn't get more fun either. It left me reflecting how out of step Russian theatre was. But after I returned home and thought about it more, I arrived at the understanding that it was us who were peculiarly out of step with all our European colleagues. English theatre is substantially different in practice to every other European country. For example, it is the playwright, not the intendant, the producer, the director or the dramaturg who is the creative main spring, not just at the Royal Court, but with all theatres or touring groups involved in new writing. So when colleagues from Europe ask how often I like the playwright to be in rehearsal I have to say it's not a question that even arises. With a new play I would anticipate the playwright to be there at every moment from the read through to the technical; indeed the budget makes specific financial provision for this by providing writers with a weekly attendance fee.

But if you look at the peculiar and particular history of English theatre you see that it has developed in a series

of seismic jerks or tsunamis rather than a course of steady development. In each case it has taken a period of digestion to absorb this shock, which is often followed by a period of fruition and achievement. My thesis is that even now we could be on the threshold of such a golden age.

Our first tsunami was called Shakespeare. Although himself a good thing, he proved a hard act to follow. In fact, in their efforts to emulate him, and in particular his tragedies, generation after generation of distinguished writers have fallen flat on their distinguished faces. Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Hardy, Dickens, Tennyson all wrote plays, most of them in tedious blank verse, and all have been justly forgotten. So Shakespeare, the great playwright can be seen to be the cause of great damage to other playwrights. He's a tsunami from which English theatre has only recently recovered.

From approximately 1642-1660 (during the English Civil War) there was no professional theatre in England. I think in history lessons at school we were taught that the Puritans closed the theatres. There may be some truth in this, but on closer inspection we find that the theatres weren't supported by the Royalists either, who saw it as being a medium for criticism and disruption. This was our second great tsunami, and when the theatres were re-opened in 1660 they had to find a new form for a new age.

For a start, women were on the stage for the first time. Not an innovation that initially met with universal critical approval. Boy actors who had played women's roles were eager to emerge from their enforced retirement. «How can actresses play women?» demanded some critics, «they don't have the experience». Nevertheless the English theatre survived, changed shape, and a new kind of theatre was forged with new heroes,

new characters and certainly new heroines. But, and this is my main point this evening, the Restoration of King Charles II took place in 1660, and the first Restoration play, that even the most assiduous academics can recall, *The Comical Revenge; or Love in a Tub*, was not written until 1664. The greatest plays of the Restoration era are arguably those of Congreve, writing in the 1690s, and the two great plays of George Farquhar which were written in 1705 and 1706 respectively. It took the English theatre fully 50 years to digest the changed social and dramatic situation, and to articulate a full-throated response.

The next crisis hit the English stage in 1737 when theatre had become too confident in its role as social critic, and Prime Minister Robert Walpole introduced the Licensing Act. Walpole had been provoked by the satire of politicians being equated with highwaymen in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, threatened by its proposed sequel *Polly* and also by Henry Fielding's play *The Historical Register of the Year 1736*. The Licensing Act was the beginning of 231 years of censorship on the English stage. In effect, it cut the theatre off from its hinterland of sex and politics that had always been its life force. For 231 years we had no possibility of a relevant theatre. Serious artists turned elsewhere. Fielding himself began his career as a playwright but ended it as a novelist. You could say the birth of the English novel was founded on the grave of English theatre. Jane Austen may have been a playwright if a theatre had existed which could have produced her nuanced social comedies. Dickens would certainly have been a dramatist. He loved the theatre and was an enthusiastic amateur actor, stage manager and producer. The great Victorian actor Macready commented particularly on his excellence as a lighting designer.

In this arid period another tsunami was provoked by the Scandinavians Ibsen and Strindberg. Ibsen was extensively

discussed and talked about in the 1880s, although not widely performed in England until the early 20th Century. Pinero, Granville-Barker and, of course, George Bernard Shaw were the particularly English response to the Scandinavian revolution, and again it was not until the 1920s, fully 40 years after the Scandinavian tsunami that Shaw's major plays were written. In addition, neither Mrs Warren's *Profession* nor D. H. Lawrence's three extraordinary plays *The Daughter-in-Law* (written 1912, first performed 1967), *A Collier's Friday Night* (1934/1965) and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* (1914/1968) were performed in the lifetime of their authors. 'Alas, if only there were a theatre able to put on my stuff' wrote D. H. Lawrence wistfully.

And the most recent transforming event in the history of English theatre, a substantial tsunami which we are still digesting and after which we are only now beginning to find the forms and purpose particular to us, is the abolition of censorship in 1968. And that is why I believe English theatre is currently on the brink of a new golden age. Chekhov and Dickens were the two great 19th century writers: one Russian, one English, one a playwright, one a novelist, although both began careers as short story writers. What else did they have in common? Well, as you probably will remember, Chekhov was a district cholera doctor, a prophylactic role designed to prevent the causes and outbreak of cholera. Dickens, too, had been much affected by three great outbreaks of typhus and cholera which had devastated London in the 1840s. One had carried off over 100,000 people. In particular, he wrote about a child farm or juvenile pauper asylum in Tooting where 100 small boys died. And what causes cholera? Dirty water. And what makes the water dirty? Shit. And this is the lesson for us. Chekhov and Dickens were both great writers

because though their heads were in the clouds their feet stayed in the shit. And I believe that is what gives the English theatre its potential greatness: its feet stay in the shit while its imagination occupies an altogether higher place.

Let me give you a specific moment. At the end of November, in London, you could have seen two plays about the global financial crisis, *The Power of Yes* by David Hare and *Enron* by Lucy Prebble. In the Tricycle Theatre was *Category B*, about the prison service, by Roy Williams, possibly our most eminent and certainly most prolific black writer. Also at Wilton's Music Hall I was directing *Mixed Up North*, a verbatim play by Robin Soans. A play set in the clapped out old mill town of Burnley, which examined the social and racial tensions arising in a town that has had three generations of unemployment.

The fact that they are about serious subjects doesn't of course make them necessarily good plays, although in point of fact all four of them attracted favourable notices and played to large audiences. Nor do I think any of them had a particular polemical or political agenda, and yet all four of them sprung from a social curiosity and a determination for the theatre to poke its nose into areas of public debate. The theatre has learnt more from journalism than any other source in the last 15 years, and I celebrate that. In fact, I would go so far as to say that my education has been completed by the investigative work involved in rehearsal; I have learned how to deliver a baby, cook crack cocaine, set up a hedge fund, assemble an AK47, set up an electronic ambush that would kill the maximum number of people... And if I couldn't select the winner of the 2 o'clock at Newmarket this afternoon, at least I could pick the five horses from which the winner is most likely to come. And I have learned far more about sex than is proper to know or appropriate to relate in this august assembly.

Some years ago, I was about to direct a new play by Mark Ravenhill called *Shopping and Fucking*. Somehow news reached my mother who rang me and said, «Oh Maxie I so hoped you had grown out of this sort of thing». But it was my daughter Kitty who was most thrilled at the prospect. In fact, she opened the envelope with the initial draft in. I had been away for some time, in Australia I think, and she said «Oh Daddy, you got another script, but it's called *Shopping and the F Word*». In fact, I knew she had some cognisance of the word because about a year earlier, when she was about 5, I had been bathing her. Her objective, which she played with a determination Stanislavsky would have admired, was to stay in the bath as long as possible. Mine, of course, was to get her to bed. «Daddy, what is the French for *arm?*», she asked. I could manage that. «What is the French for *head?*» Easy. Then, «Daddy, what is the French for *fucking?*». I was shocked. « Well, Kitty», I said after a long pause. «I don't really know what it means in English». «You know Dad», she said. «No, Kitty, I don't know and I think you had better tell me», I said in my most grown-up voice. «Well», she said, «it means when you want someone to do something very quickly so you say *fucking get out!*»

As for the future, Out of Joint's next production, *The Big Fella* by Richard Bean is set in New York amidst the Irish American community and concerns a cell of Irish Republican sympathisers engaged in raising money for the IRA who have been, unbeknownst to them, penetrated by the FBI. Following that, we will be producing Stella Feehily's new play, set in England, the Congo and Ireland. It is about young people and exposes their reasons for undertaking humanitarian work with various NGOs, and looks at some consequences.

But my claim that English theatre places the writer at the centre of the creative process has to be substantiated by

financial backing. Out of Joint is a small touring company that undertakes two productions a year, in the spring and autumn, but because we invariably programme a London season of five or six weeks, as well as touring England for a similar period of time, we are able to guarantee any playwright whose play we produce a sum of £20,000 (or thereabouts), thus giving them some assurance of a decent living. In practice these are the sums we have paid the last five writers whose plays we have produced: £18,600, £17,300, £24,700, £15,000, £20,230. In conclusion, I report that English theatre is in a flourishing state, with its heart beating, its head in the clouds and its feet in the shite where they should be. And with some change still jingling in its pocket. At least for the moment.

### **Phil George:**

Chair National Theatre Wales

National Theatre Wales was created in 2008 with the overall goal of developing and enriching English language theatre in Wales. Conceived as a flexible, non-building-based organisation, the company was set up with the following key aims:

- Offer radical and imaginative theatre choices both in the selection of plays and in production styles.
- Connect with Welsh audiences and make world-class theatre more accessible, especially to those who currently do not attend mainstream theatre.
- Introduce more and varied directorial voices.
- Facilitate a spirit of collaboration and coordination.
- Create or broker relationships between playwrights, directors, companies and theatres.

- Drive up quality and excellence.
- Raise the international profile of the best work being created in Wales.
- Focus on the identification and nurturing of talent.
- Reflect and comment upon the culture and society of Wales, past and present.

Working with the company's Artistic Director, John McGrath, and Producer, Lucy Davies, and responding to input from the wider community, the National Theatre Wales Board has focussed this overall vision into a distinctive organisational modus operandi and personality, which emphasises dialogue, location, and a sense of belonging.

National Theatre Wales will develop a body of work that sets the unique live theatre event in the context of a community of audiences, practitioners and participants all of whom feel they have an ownership of the company. It will engage actively with the digital world to build this community, and, in line with Welsh culture and Welsh theatre practice, it will put the exploration of place at the heart of its enquiries and aesthetics.

Three key values will run through all National Theatre Wales activity. Our work will be:

### **Innovative**

National Theatre Wales will open up new possibilities in theatre: from exploring new locations, to identifying burning issues and expressing them in urgent ways; from finding new roles for the audience to introducing new kinds of artists to theatre making. When co-producing with other companies, NTW will always look for the 'unexpected extra' which takes both companies' work into new territory.

### **Engaged**

As a national theatre, NTW will connect with the wide range of communities that make up a complex country. The company will produce and present work in a surprising variety of places; and every production will involve a strategy to engage and respond to new audiences. Community-led commissions will be explored. A strong relationship to the theatre makers of Wales, including students, will be prioritised. The company and its work will be open and accessible to the widest possible range of communities. The people of Wales should feel a real sense of ownership of their national theatre.

### **International**

National Theatre Wales will bring directors and companies from across the world to work with Welsh artists, actors and participants, creating new languages of theatre. It will make links with key festivals and venues to present Welsh work internationally. It will partner with other 'small countries with big neighbours' to make dynamic theatrical connections, changing the way we view the world. NTW will always aim to create work that is of international standard in its aesthetics and execution.

### **Year One Programme : A Theatre Map of Wales**

The first year-long programme of work by NTW will begin in March 2010 and feature 12 new pieces of work over the following 12 months (plus a 13th finale show at the start of the next financial year) each taking place in a different part of the country, and each developed by a different team of



artists, commissioned and guided by the Artistic Director, Producer and Staff Team.

The overall goal will be to create a “heatrical map” of Wales, and while each event should be a unique experience in its own right, it is also hoped that all the events together will say something extraordinary about the future of theatre in Wales.

«What a spectacle it promises to be. Exciting stuff indeed.»  
BBC Wales

«National Theatre of Wales’ first year programme is a thing of wonders. Feels as if all my theatrical Christmases have come at once.» Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*

«NTW –at a stroke– shifted the axis of interest, and the focus of debate, about theatre in the UK» *The Telegraph*

«A year of work that is both radical and inviting, risktaking but popular, and which places Welsh communities at its very heart.» *The Guardian*

## TEAM Programme

An interactive, participatory ethos is central to the thinking of National Theatre Wales and community advocates (TEAM members) will be essential to the company’s communications strategy. The long-term aim is to foster community-level organising that will allow the company to connect and work with the fullest possible range of people everywhere it goes. Focussed initially on the locations where NTW is producing shows, the TEAM in each area will involve approximately 20 individuals, many of whom will not be theatre or arts goers, and many of whom will also be socially or culturally disempowered. TEAM members will be central to the relationship between the NTW show and the local community. They will organise

debates, interact with artists, host community visits and help decide what happens next. They will develop the tools to become cultural activists. Working with local venues, but moving beyond the conventional marketing strategies of many of these venues, NTW’s communications strategy will involve intensive use of word-of-mouth marketing, with TEAM members at the heart of this work. NTW will provide TEAM members with a wide range of tools and information to help them spread the word not only about individual shows, but about the wider opportunity of National Theatre Wales. TEAM members will use differing means of communication according to their individual situations, ranging from online social networks, to institutions such as schools and places of worship, to informal networks of friends. The intention is that TEAM members will have a clear and genuine ownership of all the events and opportunities they communicate.

## Digital Development

Digital presence will be key to a wide range of NTW’s activity, and the company aspires to be the leading UK theatre company in terms of its digital offering. As a non-building based company, NTW will use its web presence to provide a sense of home for audiences, artists and participants, and to act as a resource, archive, debating chamber and network. The NTW community site, a social/professional network, launched in May 2009, has over 1300 members at the time of writing and has become a vibrant online hub within Wales, celebrated and recognised across the UK as the first truly active and successful theatre company online network. Developing audience engagement on the site as the shows go into production is going to be a significant shift as a wider non-professional member base joins the community.