

## **The Play of History: The Performance of Identity in Welsh Historiography and Theater**

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Historical writing has been used as a means of describing a relationship between certain concepts of Welsh national identity and the notion of performance. Some of the most important recent general studies of Welsh history have defined Wales and Welshness in terms which make strong (albeit sometimes implicit) reference to performance. I want to propose that, during the past twenty years, a body of historical and cultural writing has begun to emerge which has characterized Welshness not as a cultural condition but as a cultural act, one that requires invention rather than inhabitation or incantation. I have developed this argument as a result of reading the following (hopefully with some fealty to the originals!): Kenneth O. Morgan's book Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980, Gwyn A. Williams' When Was Wales?, and Dai Smith's Wales: A Question of History.<sup>1</sup> I have also looked at cultural and literary studies, specifically Emyr Humphreys' study The Taliesin Tradition and M. Wynn Thomas' book Internal Difference.<sup>2</sup> In my view, it is significant that the works listed have all (to a lesser or greater extent) presented the Welsh experience either as comprising fundamental social and cultural divisions (Smith and Thomas are particularly evident in this respect), or as an inconsistent and unstable shape-shifting phenomenon whose continuity of historical experience has been both tenuous and tenacious (particularly the work of Humphreys and Gwyn Williams). In all these studies, the Welsh are portrayed as a people who have retained some kind of historical identity by constantly and consciously amending their own narrative of nationhood, rather than by the preservation of a dogmatic monoculturalism. In other words, their historical narrative of Welshness can be seen as, in a very real sense, as an improvised performance, driven by internal conflict, but kept intact by a (constantly updated) sense of historical tradition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Gwyn A. Williams, When Was Wales? (London: Black Raven, 1985); Dai Smith, Wales: A Question for History (Bridgend: Seren, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Emyr Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition (London: Black Raven, 1983); M. Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> The extent to which it may be said to have remained intact is, of course, open to question and to debate, and several commentators, journalists and politicians have sought to deny the essential underlying unity and coherence of a national identity for Wales. For example, Tim Williams, a central figure in the "No for Wales" campaign during the 1997 referendum on devolution, argued passionately against the view of Wales as a

I am aware that at the heart of this narrative of performativity there is an awareness of crisis: it is no surprise that studies highlighting this notion have emerged during the past twenty years. This has been a time of considerable economic, social and cultural struggle, and it is fair to read these accounts of Welsh history as responses to the particular circumstances of contemporary Wales, however present the element of performance may be said to have been throughout history. The prime factor responsible for inciting this notion of performance is the simple fact that, throughout the epoch of modern history, Wales has not had – and still does not have – its own apparatus of state. The idea of an independent – even separate – Welsh identity is not acknowledged in any real sense by the political system under which the Welsh are governed, and this lends to the political culture of Wales a strong sense of performance, even of theater (I will highlight the distinction between these two at a later stage).

We can see this, first of all, in When Was Wales? by Gwyn Alf Williams. Written in 1985, Williams' brilliant account of the progress of historical identity in Wales blazes with life and wit – that is, until the very end, where he presents an extremely pessimistic vision of the present and of the future. Crestfallen by the results of several plebiscites in 1979, and the ongoing "paralysis of parliamentary democracy" which ensued (whereby the Conservative government retained power in spite of their failure to gain anything like a majority of votes in Wales), Williams made a series of chilling statements:

In a triple series of votes, [i.e. the first Devolution Referendum, the General Election and European elections] the Welsh electorate wrote finis to almost two hundred years of Welsh history. They rejected the political traditions to which the modern Welsh had committed themselves... They may in the process have warranted the death of Wales itself.<sup>4</sup>

In those elections, "Wales located itself firmly within The South of Britain," and "...the elimination of Welsh peculiarities and a powerful simplification suggested an integration into Britain more total than anything yet experienced. One Welsh TV political correspondent wondered aloud whether he ought to resign. Welsh politics had ceased to exist."<sup>5</sup>

The political dimension having thus temporarily collapsed, culture was the only means by which to resist. However, here again, Williams was pessimistic. Noting a "crisis of representation" affecting Wales both politically and culturally, he declared that the people had also rejected a distinct intellectual identity for Wales:

One effect of this abrupt reversal of two hundred years of history was... to cut off an intelligentsia from its people... [while there had always been exceptions and in recent times, numerous ones] most Welsh intellectuals since the eighteenth century had served ... in some sense as the articulators of the consciousness of social groups and classes whose dimensions were national. The votes of 1979 dramatically registered the end of that epoch...

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cultural unit, preferring instead to advocate an equivalence between the people of industrial South Wales and the industrial North-East of England.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, When Was Wales?, 295.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, When Was Wales?, 296.

the most visible and creative formers of opinion among the Welsh were rejected by their people, tossed into a ditch of irrelevance.<sup>6</sup>

Thus unencumbered, Wales was free to embrace all the benefits of Thatcherism. The effects of Thatcher's monetarist economic policies involved the destruction of those major extractive and smoke-stack industries which had provided the economic and social base for many areas of Wales for generations, and the use of structural unemployment as a goad to motivate and mobilize the labor force. In the midst of this socio-cultural carnage (which was still gathering pace when he wrote *When Was Wales?*), Williams attempted to take some semblance of solace from the wider view – the realization of which was, after all, his life's work. This wider, historical view enabled him to see the drastic and terrible change occurring around him as part of an ongoing process, one which had been in train for centuries. "The Welsh," he noted, "have danced between these giant cogwheels before... as a people [they] have lived by making and remaking themselves in generation after generation, usually against the odds, usually in a British context." And in that process, he says, "a sense of history has been central. The Welsh or their effective movers and shapers have repeatedly employed history to make a usable past, to turn a past into an instrument with which the present can build a future."<sup>7</sup> This points to a preoccupation with myth as well as history, a feature of Welsh historical identity to which I shall return when discussing Emyr Humphreys' *Taliesin Tradition*. And if the sense of improvised performance was not clear enough from this statement, he goes further, making a statement which has direct ramifications for those of us who are interested in theater: "Wales," he notes, "has always been now... it is an artifact which the Welsh produce. If they want to. It requires an act of choice."<sup>8</sup> By this token, Welshness may be defined as essentially performative, a set of dramaturgical maneuvers, more or less influenced by a series of historical, almost Stanislavskian "given circumstances," and based not so much on being (i.e. occupying a fixed position), but on doing (reacting to changing circumstances).<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Emyr Humphreys' account of the development of national identity in Wales makes some reference to an underlying pattern of performativity in Welsh history and literature. Once again, this may be seen as an attempt to alleviate the anxiety caused by the fact of contemporary crisis. In evoking the poet Taliesin as the presiding genius of the Welsh literary and cultural tradition, Humphreys puts his (and our) faith in a figure who may be seen as both historical and mythical, whose very identity as an individual may be a cipher for a whole tradition of praise poetry. In any case, Humphreys argues that "...the Taliesinic tradition... has contrived to be a major factor in the maintenance, stability, and continuity of the Welsh identity and the fragile concept of Welsh nationhood."<sup>10</sup> The Taliesin to whom he refers was one of the earliest Welsh poets, who sang to his lord Urien during the sixth century, mainly in the old Northern kingdom of Rheged. Taliesin is also the subject of myth, there being an elaborate legend surrounding his origins and subsequent shape-shifting battle with his mother, the formidable Ceridwen. Both the legend and poetry reveal Taliesin as a conjuror of astonishing visions and identities: the gift of transformation never saw a

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *When Was Wales?* 297.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *When Was Wales?* 304.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *When Was Wales?* 304.

<sup>9</sup> See Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Bles, 1937 [rep. 1973]), 50-51.

<sup>10</sup> Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition*, 2.

greater master. Humphreys describes the continuity of Welsh identity in terms of the influence of Taliesin because of the prime importance of poetry and associated arts of transformation in that continuity. Not only has culture filled a void left by the overthrow of an independent apparatus of state (thus ensuring that that continuity has a distinctively national characteristic), it has also ensured that the Welsh experience of history has a character of its own which seems to be able to make a virtue of sudden, often quite violent change. Humphreys himself puts it this way:

...it is in the Welsh experience that we can see most clearly how a poetic tradition can inject into a native language an authority and power that is sufficient to breathe forms of life into the national being even when independent military and political power have long withered away.<sup>11</sup>

Within this 'transformative' cultural tradition, Humphreys cites a number of figures as charismatic public "performers" of Welsh identity, some of whom were responsible for changing the terms under which Welshness was understood. These "performers" are drawn from a cast as diverse as the Renaissance magus John Dee; the great Methodist Revivalists of the eighteenth century; the poet, literary forger and inventor of rituals of origin, Iolo Morgannwg; and the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. Humphreys deploys theatrical imagery directly and with an acid wit in discussion of the latter. Describing him as "...the most dazzling performer on the stage of British imperial politics," he adds:

There may or may not have been fiery shapes on the front of heaven<sup>12</sup> at his birth but... [h]is career would justify all the fateful choices Welsh nonconformity had made during the nineteenth century. It was for the benefit of the twentieth-century model Welshman, of which he was the shining prototype, that the humble Welsh element had broken out of its monoglot mould. (If only the authors of those treacherous Blue Books could be brought back to life and forced to eat their words like leeks.) Their monoglot hatches has been transformed into a trap-door at the very center of the political stage, and out of it had sprung an actor in search of the limelight who was capable of playing a whole range of roles from Prince Charming to the Demon King.<sup>13</sup>

I hope that it is clear by now that my attempt to trace an element of performativity in the writing of Welsh history does not rely upon the use of such overt and demonstrable theatrical imagery. Rather, I have tried to argue that there is an underlying sense of performance in the work of Williams and Humphreys which has been produced in response to their reading of Welsh history at a time of acute crisis. Humphreys makes direct reference to this in his introduction to The Taliesin Tradition, and notes that this Welsh crisis is significant because it serves as a precedent for impending crises in many other cultures and nationalities:

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<sup>11</sup> Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition, 2.

<sup>12</sup> An allusion to the words of Glendower in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part I.

<sup>13</sup> Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition, 198.

...the Welsh experience [he says] prefigures in several essentials what is in effect now the position of most European nations, even the great ones like England, Germany and France. Their position in relation to each other, their inter-national bodies [i.e. the European Union] and the guiding power of the United States, bears some resemblance, especially in its cultural and even spiritual aspects to the position of Wales in relation to the greatness of England over four centuries. Under such conditions, what is the value of a distinct identity? Why should England, for example, resist the massive historic forces that would transform it into an off-shore platform of an American culture vibrating with diverse and exciting forms?<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately!), Humphreys, having posed this bomb of a question, does not answer it directly. We are left to muse upon it on our own, daily. Of course, in one sense, The Taliesin Tradition itself serves as an answer to the question, presenting the view that cultural diversity exists not only because it is willed by succeeding "acts of choice" made by a people over a long period of history, but also because historical continuity based on culture – as in the Welsh experience – tends to engender a diverse cultural continuity. Moreover, he asserts that this kind of diverse and divergent continuity should be prized because, over the medium- to long-term, it engenders a national consciousness, which is not as militant or dogmatic, as that produced by political or military power. It has the capacity to embrace change and to tolerate a certain degree of division. And it is conscious of its own constructedness and malleability. It contains, in other words, a sense of play.

Now this, you may say, is all very well, but what has it got to do with "Theater in Wales"? Well, I reply, quoting that not-altogether-palatable poem by Robert Graves, "I was coming to that."<sup>15</sup> You may have noticed – don't feel intimidated if you haven't – that so far I have made reference to 'performance' rather than "theater." I have done this partly because of the problems associated with notions of theater form – to which I will return – and partly because of the particular circumstances of Welsh theater at the moment. I don't want to spend ages going over the various machinations involved in the restructuring of public funding for theater in Wales, but a few things have to be noted as a background, for those of you who need it, and for those of you who can still bear to hear it. It is my view that, at the present moment, some of the most important examples of Welsh theater practice are being starved of public funding in order to facilitate the creation of an entirely one-dimensional, imaginatively impoverished and wholly commodified version of "Welsh theater." This is occurring as a result of major policy shifts by the Arts Council for Wales, which has instigated the creation of a number of "Welsh National Performing Arts Companies," ostensibly to get itself out of a historical catch-22 by which it found itself giving insufficient grant aid to too many companies, thus – in its own view – pleasing nobody. In the last few years, it has hatched a plan – now operational – to "fund fewer, better," thus pleasing a few beneficiaries a great deal, and waving cheerily to those other (non-beneficiaries) as they start their own long (or rather, pretty short) march out of history. Now, there's nothing wrong in essence about a public funding body changing its policies and structures of operation in order to try and produce what it perceives as a better result. I

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<sup>14</sup> Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, "A Welsh Incident".

applaud the Arts Council's instincts in this respect. But in setting up a structure whereby a few companies, resident in mainstream regional playhouses, are empowered and briefed to represent Welsh theater to their own people, (rather than those numerous other companies who, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, have ensured that Welsh theater reflects the great diversity of cultural and social identity in Wales), I believe that the Arts Council is encouraging a system which will produce a theater devoid of the kind of imaginative and intellectual complexity evidenced in the historical studies of Welshness produced by Williams and Humphreys. I would argue that, merely by being Welsh, one is forced to assimilate change and live within creative conflicts which mainstream, publicly-funded theater can not - or possibly will not - bring itself to face. Indeed, I would like to argue further that this mainstream theater in Wales, however much the content may be juggled in order to facilitate audience "access," basically inscribes all its "cultural product" (to use a phrase much-favored by the Arts Council) with a colonialist narrative. It is for that reason that I wish to distinguish between "theater" and "performance": theater has basically become a medium of cultural *exchange*; performance – inasmuch as it carries with it a more diverse set of practices – may retain the possibility of being a medium of cultural *expression*.

Moreover, a discussion of Welsh identity and history in terms of theater (rather than performance) would raise precisely those problems that are contained within the mainstream theater form in Wales. One of the most important of those problems is the strong sense of division between "actors" and "audience." There is more than a suggestion of this in Emyr Humphreys' description of Lloyd George, noted earlier. The "actor" is seen to play to an essentially passive audience, whose main function is, in the words of the French sociologist Jean Duvignaud, "to render back meaning and readiness to believe."<sup>16</sup> Duvignaud's point is that the audience surrenders its right and capacity to act in order to succumb to an experience rich in symbolic power; and while this provides much diversion for the audience, it renders the experience "socially impotent." He refers to this as a basic "sublimation" of action, and notes that everything that happens in the theater is reminiscent of those dreams in which one finds oneself running in a vain attempt to get anywhere. The experience of tension, of heightened emotion, is the result of our awareness of our "sleeping bodies": theater, he asserts is thus "a Promethean force, chained to the mountain, unable to do anything."<sup>17</sup> I believe that this model of theater, which has all the features of the mainstream, urban playhouse, perpetuates "an essentialist, totalizing, fetishized, [and] middle-class understanding" which "may limit efforts to liberation," as Benjamin Graves has noted when discussing *On National Culture* by Frantz Fanon (Fanon was discussing the concept of nationhood, but his model is equally applicable to theater).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha, in outlining his theory of "mimicry" as a prime carrier of colonialist narrative, notes that a proto-theatrical duality is a prime feature of the self-description adopted by the colonized subject:

One element of colonial discourse... envisions the colonized subject's potential for reformation and gradual approximation to the elevated

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Duvignaud, "The Theatre in Society: Society in the Theatre," in T. & E. Burns, eds. *The Sociology of Literature and Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Duvignaud, "Theatre in Society," 90.

<sup>18</sup> <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/poldiscourse/fanon/fanon2.html>

condition of the colonizer, through the redeeming experience of benevolent imperial guidance, while another contradicts this with a conception of the ontological difference (and inferiority) of the colonized subject.<sup>19</sup>

This analysis can be applied not only to the mainstream Welsh theater's mimetic aspiration to the urban English ideal (enshrined in the theaters of London's West End and South Bank) – a mimetic impulse which may also be detected in many other fields of cultural activity where "keeping up with the Anglo-American Joneses" is applauded – but also to the mainstream audience's disembodied "gaze," as described by Duvignaud.

However, other possibilities exist, one of which may be provided by the work of the Brazilian director Augusto Boal. His life's work has been dedicated to the creation of a "Theater of the Oppressed," which has – in its various manifestations – sought to encourage direct political action on the part of its participants and to contradict the notion of a theater which sublimates, and thus impedes, its subjects' capacity to intervene in social life. In his first book, helpfully entitled The Theatre of the Oppressed, he presents a lengthy critique of the classic model of tragic drama first outlined by Aristotle, damning it as a coercive system designed to encourage the audience to adopt the powerless position of the tragic hero as a description of their social circumstances – "chained to the mountain," unable to do anything, as Duvignaud would have it.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, he also lays into that great twentieth-century antidote to Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, claiming that Brecht's anti-Aristotelian "Epic theater," although successful in creating a poetics for theater which "points up a scientific curiosity with the process rather than a morbid curiosity for the denouement," ultimately requires the audience to marvel at the inventiveness of Brecht's characters and at his own skill, rather than participating in the same process of social negotiation themselves.<sup>21</sup> Boal pushes the logic of audience-participation and social intervention to its extreme. In his "Forum theater" work, spectators are encouraged to intervene directly in the presentation of a play which has been specifically created in order to highlight oppressive forces at work in their community (those oppressive forces are often identified by members of the community themselves). After its initial presentation, the play is repeated in a somewhat truncated form, members of the audience having been encouraged to intervene at a point of their own choosing by stopping the action and demonstrating how the oppressive force may be countered by a particular course of action. Suggestions to the contrary may then be made by other audience members. The result is the destruction of the sense of a functional barrier between the actor and spectator, which Boal sums up by describing participants in his actions as "spect-actors." According to Boal, the effect of releasing the "spect-actor" onto the stage is the liberation of an otherwise inaccessible sense of truth:

...when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place...  
This is how Forum Theatre was born. In this new kind of theater, the debate

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<sup>19</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics (London: Verso, 1997), 120.

<sup>20</sup> Augusto Boal, The Theatre of the Oppressed (London: Pluto, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, 111.

does not come to an end – the forum<sup>22</sup> is the show. Which is, in a manner of speaking, a desecration: we desecrate the stage, that altar over which the artist usually presides alone. We destroy the work offered by the artists [Boal's own actors in this case] in order to construct a new work out of it, together. A theater which is not didactic, in the old sense of the word and style, but pedagogic, in the sense of a collective learning.<sup>23</sup>

I would suggest, in conclusion, that this model of a theater which prizes intervention, argument, negotiation and which has a firm sense of its oppressor, is precisely that which is required, not only from a cultural, but also from a political point of view, in contemporary Wales.

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<sup>22</sup> That is, the argument and demonstration by members of the audience concerning the subversion of the oppressive force.

<sup>23</sup> Augusto Boal, The Rainbow of Desire (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.