

RE-LAUNCH OF THE ONE-MAN WELSH NATIONAL THEATRE OF DEDWYDD JONES



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‘THE GREATEST SERVICE WALES CAN RENDER
THE WORLD IS TO BE HERSELF TO THE LAST DROP OF HER BLOOD.’
HARVEY GRANVILLE -BARKER.’

The English have a national theatre, (South Bank, Shakespeare), the Irish have one (the Abbey, WB Yeats , Lady Gregory, Miss Horniman), the Northern Irish have one (Belfast Arts Theatre, Hubert and Dorothy Wilmot), the Scots have one (the Citizen’s Theatre, James Bridie; and the new peripatetic National Theatre of Scotland) and now the Welsh, at last, have one – the Welsh National Theatre of Dedwydd Jones! Although it is still a one-man show, it is the only one from Wales, the fifth and last national theatre of these islands. It is now being re-born on a remarkable raft of fifty-six plays, all by a single author.

A Welsh National Theatre of Dedwydd Jones? Read the plays and decide for yourselves!

[A Welsh National Theatre, did you say?](#)

“I found this pair old of screens but with panels (like moveable hospital screens) in a junk shop. As I examined the photos that covered the panels on both sides, I began feeling for the person who had cut them out and so lovingly pasted them up. A whole life seemed to unfold before my very eyes. I decided to write up what I saw, but I soon noticed a dark as well as a bright theme, running through the images!”

Throughout his writing career Dedwydd Jones has always called for the establishment of a Welsh national theatre, with its home theatre in Wales. In an attempt to further this aim Dedwydd Jones has been founder-member of various organizations to encourage the writing of Welsh drama: the Guild of Anglo-Welsh writers (with poet Bryn Griffiths, the late John Tripp, London); the Welsh Artists' Workshop (with the late Rae Smith, Phillip Madoc, Wales); Welsh Dramatists' Network (with Graham Jones, Dannie Abse, Wales.) To charter the uneven course of Welsh drama, Dedwydd Jones has also written a series of black books on the Welsh theatre, paying particular attention to the ghastly role played by the Welsh Arts Council. The Black Books parody the waste and chaos of the Welsh theatre arts, from the fifties to the inception of the Welsh Arts Council in 1968/9, and from that awful moment, up to the millennium, and after that, of course, the deluge.

Limited back numbers of the Black Books are available, from the author:

Vol 1: out of print

Vol II (with illustrations) a short history of Theatre in Wales, with George Bernard Shaw's famous letter on a Welsh national theatre:

Volumes III, IV and V cover the period 1980–2000

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, THE SOUTH WALES DAILY POST, JUNE 13TH, 1914

TEXT OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S LETTER (Vol 2)

There are two things that may as well be said at the outset somewhat firmly about a proposed Welsh national theatre. If it succeeds, it will not be a place for ebullition of patriotic sentiment and flattery of local self-sufficiency. On the contrary, it will be rather a place of humiliation and penitence, relieved by laughter and tears. The Irish have a national theatre, and a conspicuously successful one. But its earlier performances had often to be protected by the police. Mr Yeats's Countess Kathleen roused all the latent bigotry of Dublin against it, Synge's Playboy of the Western World produced a fortnight's rioting, and, though an admitted masterpiece of the national literature, still provokes explosions of wounded Irish conceit. The peasant hero of one of Mr Lennox Robinson's plays makes his most effective exits with the words, 'I hate Ireland!'

Everything that is narrow and ignorant and ridiculous and dishonest in Wales will be castigated ruthlessly by the Welsh national theatre, and the process will not be popular with the narrow, the ignorant, the bigoted and ridiculous. Over the border, nobody cares about Wales (why should they?) to tell her the truth about herself – to rub into her conscience the glaring faults of her striking qualities. If Wales thinks that a national theatre will be a place where her praises are sounded continually, where the male villain will be an Englishman of the church of England or the female villain a French spy or a bishop's wife, while the hero (being a Welshwoman) too good for this earth, Wales will be disappointed. Just as the preachers of Wales spend much of their time in telling the Welsh that they are going to hell, so the Welsh writers of comedy will have to console a good many of them by demonstrating that they are not worth spending good coal on.

If it be really true that Wales is in so benighted a condition that ministers are still to be found there who not only do not go to the theatre, but try to prevent other people from going, forgetting that a theatre is a place where two or three are gathered together, and that God fulfills himself in many ways without consulting the local clergy, I venture to remind these walkers in darkness that if they strangle Welsh theatre in its cradle, they will have, not a county without a theatre, but a country delivered over wholly to the crude cinematograph melodramas of the American and Italian film makers and to musical comedies on tour from London. In Scotland in the seventeenth century, and in Geneva under Calvin, all theatrical enterprise was stopped; and the result was what Knox called 'a school of Christ,' meaning, in fact, a place where joyless people hated their joyless neighbours, and caring for nothing except making money, refusing to speak or to associate with people with twenty pounds a year or less than themselves.

Such a state of things is no longer possible. If Wales will not have the best that Wales can produce, she will get the worst that the capitals of Europe can produce; and it will serve her right. There is no worse crime against religion than to close any of the conduits of

inspiration when revelation comes to mankind. It is never attempted except by the people who believe that inspiration ceased several thousand years ago, and that, in effect, god retired from business when he finished the bible and has not since had anything to say to us. the minister who says, 'I must be allowed to say what I like, as I am in the confidence of the almighty, and know what is good for him and good for you': but on no account must Shakespeare or Goethe be allowed to open their mouths for this principality, such a one ought really to have the state of his mind investigated by two doctors with a view to his treatment and cure. And the next Shakespeare or Goethe may be born in Wales.

If he finds a national theatre, then he will become a welsh poet. if not, he will have to drift to London, as i had to drift from Dublin to London (there was no Irish theatre in my day), and produce the stuff that London likes, as best he can. it is to be noted that Lord Howard de Walden, who has done much more than the public knows, to make some sort of serious poetic drama possible in London, is the man who, with London at his command, thinks it worth while to turn from it to Wales in his efforts to make a national drama strike root. what is wrong with london drama is that it has no roots; there is no taste of any native soil or race in it; it is all cloud-cuckoo land, and a very dull place that land is. If Manchester, Dublin and Glasgow produced, as they did, a genuine indigenous drama almost instantly upon the establishment of a permanent local theatre, what might Wales not do, with its natural wealth of artistic faculty and its sense of nationality?



G. B. Shaw "Wales must have the best drama that Wales can produce"

But the drama will not come until the theatre is there for it; for even a Welshman will not wrote plays without any possibility of performance. that is why people say of the welsh: taffy was a Welshman, taffy was a poet, but as he had no theatre, he never came to know it! – and so taffy, having no legitimate opportunities for the employment of his great gift of imagination and adventurousness, became the less reputable things that are mentioned in the other version of that popular rhyme.

EXCERPT from THE STAGE, article by Dedwydd Jones:

‘Wales continues its unique search for a genuine national drama, a search which has become somewhat remote of late. Its strategy now is first to ignore the Welsh drama that already exists and thereafter to keep on constructing million-pound-theatre-complexes as unassailable proofs of this non-existence. As a result of this rare logic, Wales is now studded with million-pound-theatre complexes which stand as a testament to absolutely nothing. Do empty graves require such lavish cenotaphs? The answer must, apparently, be ‘yes.’ But is the old grave that these new monuments are supposed to honour, really empty? Has anyone bothered to check the alleged corpse of Welsh drama? Yes, George Bernard Shaw felt it worth a look, and Harvey Granville-Barker added the remark quoted above. But who in Wales has ever acted on these passionate endorsements?’

EXCERPT from the Black Book on the Welsh Theatre Vol 4, ‘Asides’:

‘Now that I am in my hundred and fifty-third year, I can look back on the old dramas of life with a certain detachment, if not amusement. So when I was recently asked by the Anarchist Society of the new Confederation of European Republics to record my memories of the Welsh Theatre, I laughed out loud – ha, ha! When I recovered, I also gladly agreed to conduct a tour-cum-commentary through the swamp ... er ... ‘Park’ of Welsh Theatre Remembrance with all its massy monuments to the glorious Arts Prominents of our past.

The Welsh Arts Council Museum (WACOM) which stands at the entrance to the Park, is a stunning example of top Welsh ruin value, with deadly nightshade and black horehound growing out of every crumbling breeze-block, iron-wrought gates rusting in the nettles almost beyond recognition – like many a dramatist this foetid limbo was once meant to represent. The Museum also houses the fabled vestibule of the Plaques of the Prominents – a regurgitation really of the staggering tombs and charismatic mausoleums you see outside. The Museum contains, too, the sublime Album of Fond Welsh Theatre Recollections and its hugely entrancing sister tome the Book of Outstanding Theatre Utterances. Yes, when I think back now, how purple and damp I used to get, the fumes, gnashings and spittles I expended. But now as embark I do upon this age-old sentimental tour, all I feel is fondness, forgiveness and longing. O what nostalgia – weeps of it! – is there in my heart for the Welsh Theatre of Invisibility of the fifties, the Wars of the WACO Word Lords of the sixties, the Theatre of Bad Odours of the seventies, and wonder of wonders! – Tobyobe’s Theatre of Carrots and Footballs, of the eighties, whose influence turned out to be positively millennial! And, O, give me the WACO.

Leech-Farm oldsters – Supremo Matty ‘Three Thousand Acres’ Prichardo, Geoffrey ‘Ostrich Egg’ Axleworthy, Councillor ‘Jockstrap’ Lewis – ‘the Man with the Cleanest Mind in the World,’ Ian ‘Self-Growing’ Bell, teacher Grant ‘Indignation’ Williams, what a stand was there against public hard ons! – Roger ‘Jargoneer’ Tomlinson, Jimmy ‘Green Tree’ Evans, Alan V. Williams, ‘the Colossus of the Short-Stemmed Pipe,’ Clive ‘Whirling Dervish’ Barnes, of Llandovery, the dark-hued ‘Taffo Dreadlox’ of

near Llandaff, Andy ‘No thank you’ Manley, Bill ‘Prince of Egg’ Shakesburt, Jesus ‘Ecce Homo’ Christ, and the very Sodom of all our dear Gemorrahs – Swansea Town with the vivid memory of its Matron–Gladiator Strip Riot of the eighties still immaculate. Hot ladies of Swansea, the twenty first century and all its wankers salutes you still!’

EXCERPT from the Black Book on the Welsh Theatre, Vol V ‘Charmers’:

ENTER the CHARMER of SPLOTT, with Report, in folder:

Evenin’ there, all! Now I’m the bloke like from the Charm School in Splott and I been invited special here tonight to make this foul report here smellin’ more sweet. About public drama it is, and the downright bad arts scene like, and the funny going’s on inside there, like. Just got to lavender it up a bit, fair’s fair. What’s happened? It says, I think, that recently in Wales, there’s been a great golden wave of vice, lots of lovely evil abroad, stunnin’ turpitudes, over–the–top sin, a verytable fall–out of pure filth, plus bizarre bugs, odd spoors, eccentric infections and fey bascilli. That’s what it says. I got to make it so you smells only roses all the way. How? You wait. We Charmers of Splott, we got our sweet mysterious ways, you’ll see.

See how I’m butterin’ you all up already!, smoothin’ down all the quiverin’ bushes of lust in here. ‘What a charmin’ bugger he is,’ you are thinkin’ now, aren’t you? – sod his vice. Am I right? Smile all ye teeth! There’s lovely you are, like me. And not a trace of B.O. in the front row either. Yes, I can niff my audience tonight is more than a little devoted to their tub – bravo! Makes a nice change. Ta. Yes, refinement of body is a leadin’ canon of our Academy of Charm, tho’ I do admit I did see one or two far from immaculate collars at Chapel last Sunday, but never mind, wear a scarf, I say. Now to return to the nasty pong of the Report on the Theatre Arts in Wales here.

END OF EXCERPT from Black Book on the Welsh Theatre, Vol V, ‘Charmers.’

EXCERPT from Black Book on the Welsh Theatre

Vol III, ‘Dollops’:

ENTER TAFFO DREADLOX, an original native of Wales, now a typical example of the new Welsh uncle Tom:

TAFFO DREADLOX: OK, man, you axed for it. My opinion of dose stages and all who sails in ‘em? Heah goes! Well afta dem ten civilizin’ yahs at dat Theatre Mold, dat Massa George Roman, he buggah off wid his swan–song stunna, Waitress for the Prosecution. (Dose top katz sure do love dat Agga Christie – she oil to their grease!)

Next come in dis new Massa, Massa Toby (O.B.E.) Robertson, and den, man, tings get glistenin’ real bright, like shite on a slate. Da fust ting to glittah wuz empty promises. Massa Toby–obe, he say, dis Mold Theatre some kinda big ‘centre of excellence’, like wid da ‘same cachet’ (what dat, Massa?) and ‘on a par’ (what dat too?) ‘as Chichester.’ (where dat, Massa?) Dat Massa Toby–obe, he way out! He dig ‘Theatre of Footballs’ (Western Mail, October 15th), ‘we’re a third division team in a second division football ground.’ (I lost, Massa!) Tobyobe, he ‘rouse dese ‘excellencies to bring in outside influences (like Man U?) to shed (football?) life on the area.’ O dose gorgeous glimmerins! Massa Toby–obe, he ‘gonna connек Mold Theatre wid Great Britain at large’ so he ‘build up prestige.’ O, sweet

Lord Jeezus, like we new Taffswazians wid our natural rhythms needs that manna from heaven, man. Massa boast he 'no boaster' by 'burgeoning ' dat Mold place' (Burgeon my black jackass, massa!) 'Mold,' dis preacher say, 'is ripe for artistic face-lift' so the 'right products are coming 'to carry dis noble savage native asshole up to 'wider horizons' in dat Massa Hall of Pale Face fame. O bless us pore primitive Taffswazians here still in dis native wog-bog! Patronize us like crazy wid yore humble civilizin' mission! Massa Toby-obe, dat like noble king Arthur before you, take up dis native Taffman's burden! Shine the angel light of your genius on us pore Taff trash!"

Comments and Reactions

“Your Black Books on the Welsh Theatre are a most accomplished piece of work.”

Head Producer, Light Entertainment, BBC Radio, London.

“Thank you for your Black Books on the Welsh theatre. I read them with pleasure and amusement...”

Simon Callow

The Welsh theatre has many voices, some old, some new, some bold, and some dead. The dead are mostly resident in Wales. The bold and old and new are alive and well, mainly working in England, and beyond:

I put a few questions to these lively survivors:

'Well, and should Wales have a national theatre?'

Here are some of the answers:

Ruth Madoc:

'I should bloody well think so! And you can quote me!'

Actress Anwen Williams:

'Indeed. And more! We haven't got a space in Wales we can call our own. And you can quote me too.'

Actor Denny's Graham:

'A Welsh National Theatre would be more excitin' than Stanley Baker's Zulu.'

But when I visited the south Bank English National Theatre, my questions uncovered some Young Welsh Dead working there:

Young Welsh Actor:

'This here, the South Bank theatre, is my national theatre, and I'm a Welsh speakin' actor, too! I don't owe a bloody thing to Wales, and you can't quote me, see.'

Chorus of Welsh speaking actors:

'A Welsh national theatre would just degenerate into another unpleasant Cardiff clique. But don't quote me or I'd never work there again.'

And:

'The theatres in Wales are already doing what a national theatre would do, and you can't quote me because I'd never work again in Wales.'

But Sir Richard Eyre, former director of the English National Theatre, protested:

'A national theatre worked in Scotland and Ireland. And you can quote me.'

Roger Nott (actor):

'There isn't enough talent in Wales to keep a Welsh national theatre going. And you can quote me!'

Sir Richard Eyre (again!)

Rubbish!

Hywel Bennett:

'We haven't encouraged the best writers so we don't have a voice in the business.'

Catherine Zeta Jones:

'I have never yet put my own Welsh culture into a piece of work however much I'd like to.'

Neil Kinnock:

'My support is still strong. But we should be nurturing our culture.'

Geraint Morris, former head of HTV drama:

'The best known Welsh drama remains "How Green was my Valley", a novel written in 1939.'

Paul Rhys:

'I'm tired of always leaving. I'd love to come home and work in Wales.'

Dylan Thomas:

'I am a Welshman who does not live in his own country because he still wants to eat and drink, be rigged and roofed, and no Welsh writer can hunt his bread and butter in Wales unless he pulls his forelock to the Western Mail, Bethesdas on Sunday, and enters public houses by the back door, and reads the great Caradoc Evans, 'the most hated man in Wales,' only when alone, and by candlelight.'

Another Welsh speaking objector:

'Top Welsh actors will demand West End Salaries.'

Sir Richard Eyre (who will have his say!):

'But actors here (at the National Theatre) don't get West End salaries.'

Yet another vacant Welsh Actor:

'It would cause unemployment in existing theatres in Wales.'

Once again Sir Richard Eyre is vocal:

'Nonsense! It would provide an even greater concentration of talent.'

Stephen Daltry, film and theatre director:

'Another national theatre? Why not? We're good at appropriating other people's talents.'

Welsh dramatist Ed Thomas:

'There is no desire to climb out of the collective Welsh ghetto. The Welsh are miserabilists and invisibilities. We must re-invent Wales.'

Anwen Williams (again!):

'I could really get my teeth into an international Welsh stage.'

Adolf Hitler:

'This internationalism must stop!'

Julian Mitchell:

'The power of directors has got completely out of hand.'

Jan Morris:

'Nobody has fought more for a dignified, lively and honourable theatre in Wales than Dedwydd 'Sweet Delight' Jones.

Chorus of Welsh speaking actors:

'That bloody ignorant self-publicist ex-pat! Never!'

Dr Kim Howells, MP:

'You are clearly drumming up a storm and Wales is all the better for it.'

Chorus of Welsh speaking actors:

'You insult all that is best in Wales.'

The late Kenneth Griffith:

'You won't stop until you're dead. I must say I admire that.'

Famous Welsh speaking actor (whose name I forget) objecting to a Black Book:

'Don't you know who I am? Belt up or I'll punch your head in!'

Charismatic actor, Rhys Ifans:

'You have my full support. Let the cynics suck!'

Lord Mayor of Cardiff:

'It should be possible to identify a way forward.'

Welsh speaking actor at his best:

'I propose a touring Welsh national theatre, but only for abroad. We don't need one at home.'

Sir Richard Eyre:

'Incomprehensible!'

Welsh speaking actor, speaking for the Welsh Arts Council:

'We don't want the dead hand of professionalism here!'

Dramatist/director, Sean Mathias:

'It could be very exciting if the right forces were in place.'

Dylan Thomas (again!):

'No Welsh writer can hunt his bread and butter in Wales unless he pulls his forelock.'

Dafydd Wigley, MP, (in some despair):

'This is more torturous than Westminster politics.'

The late Kenneth Griffith, (again!):

'The only hope for an English national theatre, let alone a Welsh one, is to blow it up.'

Former Cardiff theatre director, Ian Watt-Smith:

'This is quite like old times.'

Dame Judi Dench:

'I wish you lots of luck in achieving a Welsh national theatre for Wales.'

A last word of hope from Sir Richard Eyre:

'I can only applaud the idea. If there is anything I can do to help...'

So the quick answered the dead and the debate moved on. And what were the 'constructive suggestions'?

Ruth Madoc (bless her!):

'In Wales we should make the big theatres small and the small theatres big. And put the visionaries in charge! Plays are the thing! Let the artists lead!'

'What is the best mix then, Ruth?'

'Plays and players, bricks and mortar, and then money.'

Sir Richard Eyre (the last word!):

'Exactly! Writers, actors, cash and then a home.'

'Why actors and writers first?'

'Identity is all. Plays define a theatre, not administrators or buildings.'

What? The disreputable, bohemian actors and the mad, piss-artist writers to define a national theatre? Not in Wales! Not respectable at all.

I mean, such actors as Anthony Hopkins, Jonathan Pryce, Timothy Dalton, Paul Rhys, Sian Phillips, Nerys Hughes, Richard Griffiths, Kenneth Griffith, Victor Spinetti, Windsor Davies, Michael Sheen, Rhys Ifans, and all that Welsh ilk, in charge? Never. And then there are drunken Welsh plays by other dissolute Welsh thespian piss-artists, like: *Change* by Jo Francis (1910), *Taffy* by Caradoc Evans (1923), *A Comedy of Good and Evil* by Richard Hughes (1923, the world's ever first radio play *Danger* by Richard Hughes (1924), *The Corn is Green* by Emlyn Williams (1938), *Under Milk Pudding* by Dylan Thomas (1952), *Dark Stranger* by Diana Morgan, *Progress to the Park* by Alun Owen, *House of Cowards* by Dannie Abse, *Small Change* by Peter Gill, *The Snowdrifter* by Alun Richards. *The Keep* by Gwyn

Thomas, Bard by Dedwydd 'Sweet Delight' Jones, House of America by Ed Thomas – enough for a season or two, and there are still more coming up for breath.

But, I mean, a 'home,' permanent like, within the borders of Wales, even Cardiff? What will the neighbours say? Enough. Let the present mediocrities and their fees stay in place forever! – or the Welsh Assembly could just possibly strip the Welsh Arts Council and its grovelling satrapies of their powers and monopolies, and at last put Welsh resources directly into the pockets of its actors and writers, so the spirit of the community which they alone truly represent, is finally renewed, and our own dramatists and poets stand equal among the nations, from Wales to the world.