

National Theatre Wales

Assembly

Devinda de Silva explains how the National Theatre Wales Assembly events work

National Theatre Wales creates bold, invigorating theatre in the English language, rooted in Wales, with an international reach. Without a building of our own, in our first year we have focused on creating a series of new productions, each one in a different location, many of them site specific: our *Theatre Map of Wales*.

Being a non-building-based theatre company has enabled us to focus our investment on the artistic programme and be freer and more versatile in the way we think and make theatre – our first year has seen work created in taxis, nightclubs, houses, the beach and many other locations.

It also means that we can set up our base in any location and really get the feel of a place and its people long before our main show starts. This time spent in an area is vital in helping us create our Assembly events.

The Assembly is a theatre-debate event that runs alongside our main productions. It's a platform for local artists and local people to respond, share and discuss their

knowledge and understanding of a particular local issue. The event always works around a question or theme that is relevant to a place at that time and always comes from the community we are based in. It usually takes a few weeks of talking and listening to as many people as possible to find the right question. We always enlist the help of local people to find the question and we work with them to find the best way of doing this. They've set up stalls in town centres, gone out with a flipcam and videoed responses (which is often shown as part of the performance), or just talked to friends and family. In Newport we asked 'What Kind of Ghosts Haunt Newport?', in Milford Haven we asked 'What is Milford's Energy?', in Butetown, the old 'bay area' of Cardiff notoriously divided from new developments by a railway line, we asked 'Does Butetown Want to Cross the Tracks?'

The Assembly takes place in a location which is symbolic of the place or which relates to the question. It has been held in a bus station, an empty shop, a pub and a derelict bank, and lasts for approximately two hours with audiences of up to 100 people.



Cardiff Assembly, Cardiff © Jorge Lizalde

Butetown Assembly, © Jorge Lizalde



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The format of the event usually consists of discussion around the question broken up with moments of performance. For the discussion, the audience is split into groups who each get to debate the question with guest speakers who have a unique knowledge of the topic. For the performances we work with local artists over a period of five days to create a number of pieces based around the question or theme.

One of the most important things about the Assembly is that it's just the beginning of our engagement with a community. From the discussions we come up with a plan of action where we work together to achieve a desired outcome. We always return to an area to do follow-up work and we have helped set up a number of projects from film making to fringe theatre, and are currently working on setting up a community radio station. Most of our follow-up work is done through our TEAM programme which gives people the chance to get involved in all aspects of National Theatre Wales' work. One facet of TEAM is that it offers training and support for people to run these projects themselves.

The Assembly has also given us the opportunity to

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meet and work with people we would not have reached otherwise. The opportunity to debate an urgent local question often attracts a new range of people to our work. For example, in Cardiff the Assembly has been the beginning of a truly productive relationship with the Somali community. A group of young Somali men who we reached through the Assembly are now creating a show with us. ●



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