

## **John McGrath, Artistic Director, National Theatre Wales**

### ***Towards a digital theatre***

John E. McGrath is the first Artistic Director of the new National Theatre Wales, where he will be developing a wide range of work with a focus on location, engagement, innovation and internationalism. From 1999–2008 John was Artistic Director of *Contact*, Manchester's award winning space, bringing new theatre to diverse young audiences. As a director John has recently worked with hip hop theatre artist Benji Reid (b like water), with poet Lemn Sissay (Storm and Something Dark), on a multimedia collaboration with writer Kaite O'Reilly and visual artist Paul Clay (Perfect) and with Contact Young Actors Company on the theatre installation Close Up.

Prior to his time at Contact, John trained and worked in New York for several years, including a stint as Associate Director of leading experimental company Mabou Mines. His book, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space* was published by Routledge in 2004. He was the Co-Founder and Chair of PANDA, the Performing Arts Network and Development Agency. In 2005 he was awarded the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA) Cultural Leadership Award.

National Theatre Wales is developing a way of making theatre that is as transparent as possible in order to ensure that everyone can find a way in – and digital media is at the heart of this approach. In this presentation John talked about the impact digital media is having on the way the company behaves, the way the company is structured, the work that is produced, and the relationships that they have with the public.

### **Towards a digital theatre**

This may be the first time that someone has presented at an AMA event not having sold a single ticket for a performance. National Theatre Wales (NTW) hasn't had any performances and hasn't sold any tickets yet. So this is all provisional and is being invented as we speak.

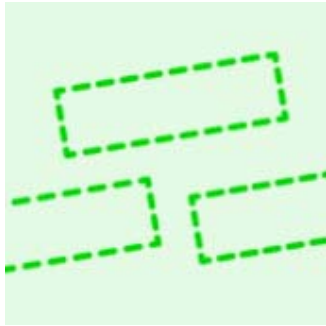
However, it already has an online presence. The NTW site has been launched (<http://nationaltheatrewales.org>)

We want to make people part of a NTW community. As an arts organisation this is ultimately the goal – to be a creative community of the widest possible range of people. *In Wales - Of Wales - In Theatre*. Ticket buying is only a step in a relationship that lasts a lifetime.



The website, though central and important, is not the first online presence of NTW. It used to be the case that an arts organisation would start with its website and then move on from there, but at NTW by the time it was launched there was already an online community. So, NTW started with a Ning based community.

[A recent YouTube entry (by David Garland Jones) on the NTW website was played as an example of how the community has already been working.]



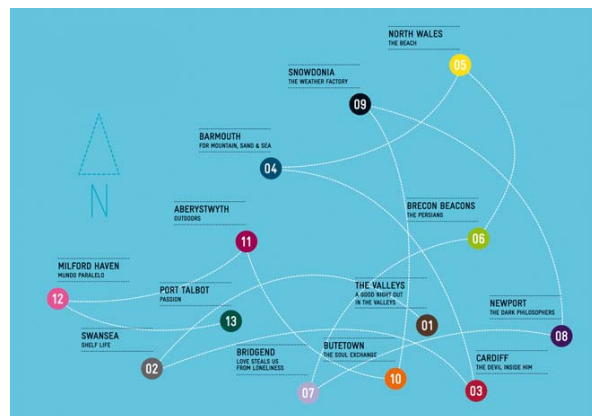
There are a number of lessons to be learned from the clip.

- Just because you have lots of online friends doesn't mean anyone will turn up in person
- Online does not replace the live event. It's about the excitement and dynamic relationship between the two
- The group will always do it better. This chance posting was an excellent intro for this presentation but it hadn't been requested or invented by NTW

National Theatre Wales was founded in 2008 to create a theatre which is exciting and relevant to people throughout Wales. It was to be based loosely on the Scotland model, to be a theatre without walls; not existing within a building, though it was stepping into a different context. It's a context with less of a producing theatre infrastructure, a dispersed population, a strong tradition of communitarianism and a history of de-centralisation.

When first thinking about NTW we thought there were three key considerations

- Digital offering, because:
  - there are few national theatre institutions known for their digital offering and it was therefore a good opportunity
  - national remit in a country with a strong tradition of decentralisation and a caution about things being brought into the capital or centre
  - as cultural organisations we should be about building creative communities and everyone that was touched by NTW could become part.
- Branding and identity:
  - embracing ideas of community
  - visual identity would not be about snappy statements and overly constricting corporate identity
- Theatre offering should work with the idea of digital, community, spread etc (as outlined above)
  - the first year's production idea is based on the theatre map (right) involving different parts of Wales
  - each show has different digital elements, a Twitter #tag etc.



In developing a digital strategy, there were three main elements

- Focus on community building
- The organisation in its day-to-day operations needed to be a digital organisation
- Look at how the digital would link with the development of theatre

Ning was used as the central method of social networking. It had advantages over its competitors because it had the ability to be bespoke, to enable engagement with creative people through profiles, blogging, ability to add material, build a network etc but in a relatively

limited set of ways. This was more important to begin with – the wider community and followers could come later. It allowed us to design it visually and to decide very precisely which elements we wanted to use.

Next, we brought in the experts. We knew what we wanted to do but we didn't know how to do it. So, we advertised widely for social media designers and we employed the only people who said they didn't like websites, working with what is already available. They also had a good sense of how groups work (anthropologically).

In order to do this we went phase by phase, beginning with the way the organisation behaved. At that time there were seven core members of staff and everyone was encouraged to think digitally about the way they worked. At one stage they were all locked in a room and they couldn't leave until they'd had a go.

Working outwards from this core group a few friends were invited. This was followed by a 'house warming' and launch of the brand, recruitment of ambassadors – the two most successful of whom were the unthreatening ones over 60. They signed up loads of people. Friends brought friends and within a couple of months there were a thousand active members.



In order to post you must sign up and you must use your real name. It has become a self-managing and governing site. The only occasion when someone has been removed is on account of them not giving their real name.

Many companies use it to publicise their own work, which has given it a wider value beyond NTW's own work.

On the other hand, NTW has benefited from well known bloggers and writers from elsewhere blogging on the site and making links and connections.

There was then just the delicate matter of landing a website on top of this activity.

### Digital operations and digital content

NTW is a virtually-run organisation. There is no office server. All the documents are stored on the 'cloud' and staff can work from anywhere. Staff are kitted up with equipment for recording video and audio. It means that the organisation can cover Wales and it can do it digitally. This meant that the launch on 5<sup>th</sup> November could be done digitally rather than in a building. It was quite imaginative – anyone who told us that they were watching as part of a group was sent a cake and on the day over a 1,000 computers logged on.

There are a wide variety of shows, some of them very traditional, others are site-specific and some are digital in their making. The digital was intentionally added, not as an extra but as a key part of the programme.

For example, we commissioned Hide and Seek to produce a taster piece of interactive theatre.

[A video of 'Phone Box Frenzy' by Hide and Seek as reported by the BBC was shown].

## Website

1,200 people on Ning was a good start, but ultimately we needed to attract tens of thousands of people. So the website was needed for this.

The website was designed to pull in content from NTW social media and other places on the web. This should be a user-friendly space with the intention that anyone who is coming through to buy a ticket or find out more about a show will want to stick around.

JM finished with a quote from Dominic Cavendish's blog, from *The Daily Telegraph*:

*“National Theatre Wales has, at a stroke, shifted the axis of interest and the focus of debate about theatre in the UK just by telling us what’s in store across Wales in 2010/11. It’s hard to disentangle the medium by which NTW is launched from its message. The kind of work it will produce will be of a piece with the internet age; communal, participatory, geographically far flung. On paper what we have is theatre which looks to YouTube or social networking sites as its lode stars. In the birth of NTW we might just be seeing the death of the individual as the key driving force in our theatre. That’s as potentially scary as it is exciting. Who knows quite where it will lead, but for the time being let’s at least observe that from out of nowhere, Wales is taking us towards a watershed moment.”*

He is getting a little carried away and this practice is perhaps not as unusual as Dominic Cavendish thinks, but it was great that *The Daily Telegraph* noticed. It shows the importance of trusting our communities; about understanding they aren't just ticket buyers but people who are joining our community. Potentially we then begin to ask deep questions about theatre, what it is and what it's for.