

# The Gathering 2009

*The writer Charles Way was invited to Belfast for the annual all-Ireland meeting of artists, promoters and researchers in theatre for young audiences. Charles Way lives in Wales and has been writing plays for children for over thirty years. His work has been staged professionally in Germany, Russia, USA and many other countries in recent years.*

Dear friends and colleagues it is a great honour to be with you all here today in Belfast. I would like to talk to you today about the importance of theatre for children and young people– about my own participation in this field for that last 35 years– and above all– in these austere times–I want to talk positively about our art form–because despite the ongoing difficulties we have with funding–and perhaps have always had– theatre for and with young people is an expanding idea–and practice. We are part of a world wide growing movement–and it is surprising to many people including some in our own profession as well as teachers –politicians etc who don't as yet see the larger picture. We live in a divisive world– but here is an art form that can truly work as a kind of binding agent—in terms of sharing traditions and practice– but also in terms of creating something new–because when people meet they share ideas and when ideas meet they tend to have sex as it were and make new ideas– new forms– and one thing I have learnt over thirty five years is that nothing stays the same–our art form is always on the move–and that's exciting–and challenging too as an artist. We are in confusing time of change and cutbacks and in that context some of what I have just said may sound a little idealistic– and I will confess to a streak of idealism in my nature and in my work– I am an optimistic writer–I just can't help it but I am also more realistic than I have ever been– I have existed as freelancer in 'the market place' as they say– for a long time–so I've learnt some survival techniques to equal Ray Mears – I can rub two sticks together in a forest clearing and make so called 'poor' theatre if I have to–but I am more convinced than ever that our art form– is not only worth ever penny that it

costs– its also a deep and positive part of our **whole** economy–it is not and never has been art for arts sake. Of course we invest in the future lives of young people in a non material way– but we are also part of a larger economy that also makes hard cash–because everything is related and the industry works by responding to ideas from every other sector. The private and public sectors of the arts are intimately linked– actors, writers designers directors continually work in both–Most educated and trained under some sort of subsidy– but who then later are part of financially successful plays or films–but you don't make the money later unless you have the investment now–and the investment that really counts –is in people. Which is why I simply cannot understand the current swathe of cuts–in the Arts– when the return is so huge.

Some investments – don't appear to make money– or should we say have value in the short term–but we are involved in a long term project which is concerned with– the deep well being of a society–and for a modern society to work well–it needs robust and healthy conversations–about its own nature–who are we–why do we behave as we do–? It cannot be afraid to ask these questions. It demands a moral theatre that isn't moralistic. And drama–theatre–for young and old is ideally suited to this purpose– because it almost always concerns itself with–the individual in a social context. It seems strange then we sometimes seem to be arguing not only for its growth–but for its very survival. We cannot take it for granted that everyone else shares our love and understanding of the theatre–for some it–all art should be paid for by the consumer of it–which would rule out the kind of subsidy I think children deserve–for some– theatre carries conventions that make them feel uneasy. You have to dress up–you have to be quiet etc–but I think theatre for children and young people as well as community theatre has been instrumental over the last 40 years in the general democratisation of theatre and this is an ongoing journey and challenge. Children's and Young peoples theatre contains within its very practice all the political buzz words–its accessible–its participatory etc etc and as an art form–children's

theatre—has challenged and developed through its basic realities— usually an unswept school hall after dinner— the idea of theatre itself— a theatre without walls—without ceremony. The open space. This is not an elitist experience— it's for the common man woman and child but not everyone gets exposed to it early in life. For myself—it was not seeing theatre on a regular basis that got me involved in—in fact I was limited to one panto a year— and it was dull— it was actually the doing of it— before knowing anything about good or bad drama —from eleven years old with a school drama group—I was involved in creating theatre through mucking about really—Playing at playing—that's what got really got me interested. Before that —I had and retain a straightforward love of story. This was due to my father who had a knack for creating anticipation— when spinning a yarn—he was the master of the dramatic pause. He used to drive the local kids to school and back in a big old untrustworthy bus and—being Devon—this could mean a forty minute ride and the kids didn't sit at the back of the bus when he was driving they sat around the big gear stick at the front of the bus. He would tell them about his time in India when driving along a road—rather like this one — a tiger— three times the length of man stepped into the middle of the road— and stopped—slowly the tiger turns to look at the driver— by this time the kids are looking out of the front of the bus down a Devon country lane— and they can see the tiger—he describes the stripes—the lazy look of power. How it slopes off into the jungle. This is the spell— storytellers love to create— to maintain that spell —well that the skill— that's the craft.

But when a young person who has never had any of that background at all— sees a play for the first time at say sixteen—that person has to take on not only the themes of the piece but the whole form—which has taken hundreds of years to develop—the use of symbolic language etc. And it's amazing to me that the form—still can and does speak directly to the young person who has not been to theatre—it's almost as if—the form is in our genes. When a young person is new to seeing theatre— it's crucial that the piece is strong— both in form and content. That's its truly emotional—or emotionally true—.

That's the key- I believe. The question is then-How do we make it strong- a powerful tool for communication? Well- there are lots of ways- the individual writer- actor- designer- director needs time to emotionally and intellectually engage with the audience- and their experiences at a deep level- because children know when a piece of work is shallow-you hear that kind of braying laughter- which they do in a strange union- as if a custard pie has been thrown- this where we all laugh kids. People have said to me they'd like to write a novel or a play-and to start they'll write something for children - because it's easier- simpler than writing for adults-this idea persists. It tells us something about how children are perceived- and about the childhoods of the people who hold to that notion and their idea of art- but there has been a revolution in children's arts during the last forty years and it continues--it continues because we examine our work in deep ways-with challenging criteria-its no longer good enough to say- well I didn't think it was any good as a play-but the kids enjoyed it- therefore its ok. It's not okay-we have moved forward and it's the moving forward that grips my imagination.

As well as the artists investing in the work- the society needs to invest in the artists who make it-and in the infrastructure that they exist within. The life of companies. I believe in theatre companies in the same way I believe in the wheel-it just was there really- waiting to be discovered-or invented- and once the theatre company became itself as a social structure it felt somehow completely natural- just like the wheel and how did we ever do without it .

The practice of theatre- the group of actors touring round in horse drawn carts -{and now transit vans} -seems so deeply related to our development as a culture and also to our individual childhood experience of 'play' that it can't be destroyed--though it can be attacked-made poor. I learnt my craft-'imbedded' as it were within companies-working through Improvisation learning the nature of the empty space- and its strange transformative possibilities. I have spent the last ten or so years writing on commission- it is interesting to see that the creation of new material from companies-rather

than from straight forward commissions from writers working alone– is the stuff that’s pushing theatre forward at the moment. The work is more visual than ever– sometimes wholly sensory. For me–working with companies pushes me forward –motivates and sustains me.

I also think that in relationship to a society represented by schools and councils a young peoples theatre company has different needs to an adult touring company –it needs to develop long term relationships– it needs sustainability. This maybe true of all companies–but there is something unique about the social relationship the young peoples company strikes up with its community–its more than just an agreement with an individual to sit and watch through the purchase of a ticket. The problem with long term funding–is how to sustain the hard won links that a company builds with the community and keep the company fresh and alive artistically– not to stifle itself– by just doing one show after another. Here– an arts council–has a part to play–because by helping the company stay fresh they are improving or maintaining the quality of the work– So I would argue not only for funding that liberates the individual artist– the project funding– but strongly for an theatre infrastructure–for children and young people–that is not always in flux and at the mercy of political changes. Teachers– and theatre venues presenting plays/theatre for the young need some solid ground. Some continuity–and this is under attack now.

In Wales we have several long standing companies– including Gwent theatre and Powys theatre– who ‘ have served’ the country for over thirty years who have literally made Wales a better place to live by their work– for thousands and thousands of young people–and these companies are being axed. It takes a long time to build a company and a day to cut it down. The infrastructure for artists working with young people is under attack–in a sense–the young are under attack because many will never have the chance to see a piece of live theatre–which to my mind is like not giving a child a book to read. Who would sanction that?

In order for the quality of young peoples work to be maintained and developed we need to work towards creating a structure of theatre companies which makes it possible for artists working in the sector—to actually maintain a life. It is not necessarily the same kind of life— that a so called 'jobbing actor' might have. It is not a life that will lead to great riches or fame—it is vocational to some degree— but if you can't pay the rent—you'll be looking for other work—and we lose the talents— and we lose the opportunity of developing really experienced men and women in our field. People—who through their practice—develop theories about the work that can be passed on—and of course challenged— developed. This does not mean to say that artists should not flow freely from one type of theatre to another depending on their skills—or that new companies should not be made by innovative people— I am talking about the base line—the right of every child to have access to the art form— and it seems that the development of theatre for children and young people is pushed forward by people who have made a life times commitment to it and don't just dip in and out.

We talk— a lot at the moment about— participation in society— and I have been involved in some negative or downbeat discussions about young peoples apparent un involvement— in politics in particular— but if we look at theatre as a function of society— and not something that sits outside of it— {Which is how—many people do perceive theatre— as an experience that is somehow diversionary to life—} and when we see a group of children or teenagers watch a piece of theatre— they are in fact participating in society— and afterwards— in a workshop they may start—to really talk about it— this is to see them engaged in the world we all inhabit— and in these days when many other forms seems to offer isolation maybe our art form is more important than ever. Watching a play—or dance is in itself a social act because it is ' shared'— and its unique combination of many art forms in one—unifying in one story which tugs at the heart and the head is special—it can move points of view— and its power lies in that— and because of that power it sometimes perceived as dangerous—which is why dictators—who on

seizing state control—close down the theatres— it is a possible place of dissent— and by closing them down they acknowledge the power of the medium.

Different countries use Theatre for children in different ways—sometimes— I recently saw a Korean theatre company perform a visual and musical piece— about— yes— A bit of dog poo— It was an actress in full poo body suit and she sang very sweetly— and this piece of poo felt bad about itself because other creatures—looked down their noses at it—naturally—but eventually a dandelion seed planted itself in the poo and the last image on stage is a magnificent yellow flower—so the piece of poo had a purpose after all. Strangely moving. The purpose of this is basically moral— however bad you feel about yourself you have something important to do in the world and don't treat others badly because they will be flowers one day and then you'll feel sorry that you bullied them. It's a message— and that culture used the art form on that occasion as kind of Parent figure—telling the child how to be good. Respect others. It was actually quite beautiful— and it did something unique I thought—It tapped into a bodily function— that the kids had— yes— a deep relationship too—and utilised a metaphor most western theatre would have been too embarrassed to approach.

The play made me think of those occasions when I have been 'message / driven as a playwright—which in the late seventies and early eighties seemed to be Okay—we were in step with the times—The left had a message—the right had a message and there were— it appeared clear choices and differences to be had —which were reflected in what was then called 'alternative' theatre— which seems to have faded now from the theatre lexicon. How much good it did I'm not sure because we were probably preaching to the converted most of the time. And therein lay the question for me personally— I began to wonder if I could fulfil my potential as an artist within such a prescriptive outlook— the answer was of course no— but I certainly learned my craft within the arts provision that was provided by the creation of a whole raft of theatre companies in the seventies and eighties. These companies —gave me the

chance—to try and fail and try again. It was not until my early thirties however that I wrote a piece called *The Flood*— which was a reworking of the Noah Myth—about a modern family who survive the end of the world in a yellow boat— that I really found my own theatrical voice. Where I found theatre to be truly powerful—where I found that ‘tiger in the middle of the road’ moment. The play— was still moral but in a questioning way. And it contains— a mystery which all plays – perhaps all art needs— the mystery of ‘Why did it start raining and why didn’t it stop?’. If these questions are answered then the play loses its mystery and becomes some weak tool for ‘making people better’—this is not the function of art and young peoples theatre needs to be released from this stricture that has been passed down to it from the early days of TIE. This does not mean the play has ‘nothing to say’ but I found a way of making that ‘saying’ a real part of the narrative. People spend a lot of time trashing narrative these days— or stories that are ‘linear’ which has become a kind of bad word— but I remind myself that Shakespeare and Brecht— my two storytelling heroes— kept their beginnings middles and ends—in the right order. Anyway— *The Flood* was a breakthrough for me— because I rediscovered the power of the art form—which I was beginning to lose faith in— and I then felt that yes—YPT and children’s theatre was for me the right place for me to be an artist.

People sometimes ask me—why have you chosen to work outside the mainstream?— Well to me our work is the mainstream—its just a question of perspective—In my own perception I haven’t spent 35 years working on the fringe—I’ve been at the place where art matters.

Interestingly— the Independent said of *The Flood* that—‘the play was well written enough to warrant adult attention’ –How kind— which conveys something of the distance that that adult theatre goer perceived between his theatre world and the kids theatre world – which generally he obviously thought to be crap – and maybe a lot of it was – but it changed – transformed.



I'm pretty sure that *The Flood*—would never have been performed in America—not just because it was using a bible story in a secular way—but because it was emotionally powerful— a bit disturbing

The use and power of theatre for children—is potentially a hot potato in some countries. In America—the parents—are very powerful— and if you upset them— by upsetting the kids—they might not come back. They pay for the theatre and American children's theatre has been growing steadily. My two most successful plays— from a critical point of view for young people—Red Red Shoes about the Balkan Crisis and Missing about child poverty—would not be performed there— not for young people. They are too 'dark' but then I think the theatre I like is always a bit upsetting—is it different for kids?

What should our stories be about? Do they always need a happy ending? Certainly in Sweden and Holland the theatre companies don't feel they've been truthful to themselves or their themes if they don't at least disturb the children—in a positive way—and the parents seem to accept the theatre as the proper place for 'darker' journeys. They trust the artists and that the engagement with difficult themes is good for the development of the child—not injurious. I am somewhere in the middle of this spectrum—one has to earn a living and you can't go round upsetting everyone—not all of the time—but it's a very active debate in my mind. I have begun to work consistently in America and it's a challenge to find material that is both artistically rewarding and also going to attract a sizeable audience. It is hard to produce great works of theatre if one can't be true to oneself—only to the market— but we have an obligation to ourselves and the future to invest in new work and not simply adapt the work of novelists—which in troubled financial times is usually the path chosen. I am always trying to conjure up narrative ways of pulling an audience in and them taking them by surprise— but its an artistic challenge. The same problem but in a more deadly way was felt by Russian authors under communism and as ever artists— who feel constrained in some way by the context they found themselves in—turn to metaphor. This is an odd positive/negative since it forces the author to use 'disguise' It is part of

the craft—which lets the audience discover meaning or ‘implication’ through action— it gives them the power of interpretation—the very thing which message theatre takes away. The piece of work becomes a kind of riddle. But for children—how do you have a clear riddle? I find myself using the need for disguise and the search for clarity as creative opposites that bounce off one another.

Perhaps the **answer** lies in avoiding the **answer**—if one exists— and instead be true to the question inherent in the action—Follow the question—like Hansel and Gretel follow the breadcrumbs—even if it leads to something uncomfortable. I believe the theatre is a safe environment—in the hands of trained and practised actors, writers, directors— to look at the big subjects and emotions that face us —it is a place to confront confusion— and alarm— and this is what young people are faced with. Very young children have to deal with a stack of fears and worries about the environment— terrorism— stranger danger— financial collapse etc etc—We have to find stories that allow them to meet these ‘realities’ in ways which are empowering.

In my work the child protagonist— and there isn’t always one— but generally— comes to a point when they positively effect the dramatic situation the story lands them in.

In ‘A spell of cold weather’— a play for the very young— Holly—who is about six goes to stay with Betty and Bob—two very unhappy farmers—on their small holding. Her actions and presence there brings them back to emotional spiritual and it is suggested financial health. This is a very positive story— but we know that some children’s experiences are the opposite. I felt compelled to write *Red Red Shoes* after the Balkan crisis of the nineties— when I began to wonder what effect war would have on the youth. The play literally fell out of me—and was a move forward both in form and content. The story structure mirrors the fractured life of the child protagonist—It blended — fairytale narrative—with dance. How can you examine the experience of ethnic cleansing in a positive way? In this play—I followed the question— **how**

**do people behave like this to one another?**—It led to something I had never done before which was to dramatise the death of the child protagonist—it felt – the proper end to the story. It takes place when on returning to her country Franvera reunites with a childhood friend— who is now on the receiving end of the same ethnic hatred that Franvera once faced. In defending— her friend— she becomes the target and the victim—and is shot but for a moment she shows the world as it might be— how it is possible to behave. For me this is one of the functions of art— and in a particular a central function of children’s theatre—The world may be difficult—cruel— but it need not be so. It is not just about reflecting reality— artists change it challenge it and reveal the possible.

All this sounds rather worthy—and one must never forget that any style of theatre—must draw the audience – through the power of story. In my mid thirties— I decided not to write for TV but to concentrate on theatre— to keep practising the art— and I saw that at Xmas families were sometimes paying a lot of money to see theatre that had no story no inner magic. The worst experience I had was watching *Little and Large* with Frank Bruno at The Bristol Hippodrome – do *Babes in the Wood* – there was no story— no power— just marketing. So I set out to write a number of alternative seasonal plays, choosing classic tales but reinventing them – finding in them huge psychological depth and stirring action. Add to this—real characters— characters with faults— and I found myself writing ‘Family theatre’ or theatre that excluded no one—a form which The National Theatre for years thought far beneath them— as if children were not part of the nation—until they discovered it could make them a bob or two. People like Vicky Ireland at Polka –Phil Clark at the Sherman— and many others had been pioneering this kind of work for years— and Vicky Ireland commissioned me to write a version of *Sleeping Beauty*— which became the first of a series of plays—of which I am very proud. They are all about growing up— and the journey into adult life— about overcoming fears and ultimately achieving goals.

Of course—one of my goals— as with all of us—is how to make a living— and the straightforward commissioning of the family seasonal play has certainly helped me do that —but in recent years— I have experienced something different— something new in how the creative process might begin— and its to with Co producing— co commissioning. A theatre company in Germany wanted to commission me— but didn't have enough cash for the whole fee— so I approached a theatre company in Wales and eventually a co commission happened— which was cheaper for both companies and resulted in *Missing* — a play about the nature of poverty. As a result the two directors saw how each other worked and we all gained a great deal artistically— because the approaches were so different and the productions were startlingly different— but both very strong.

It also shows that its sometimes hard work to make things happen— and I am having to find new avenues to achieve my goal—which is principally to keep creating— and its difficult to achieve any goals without a helping hand— this is a collaborative art form and as playwright and now theatre director—I have had many —collaborators—or‘ Champions’ I could call them—people who have believed in my work. Without them I wouldn't have been able to develop. No one can work in this profession alone.

As individuals we need champions— and as theatre companies we need the same— We need to find teachers, politicians, and councillors who will fight our corner for an art form that truly is socially cohesive.

We are told to look to American Style funding —but in truth this is rarely going to work for the type of companies represented at this Gathering— I have worked a lot in America these past ten years and met some of the seriously rich who have expressed a social obligation to support the arts for the young— I can't see that happening in Great Britain in the same way. Maybe for the larger companies— but those champions of the arts aren't available to us— or able to create sustainable funding. We need the various

Arts Councils– to fight our corner–and not simply administer the Governments demand for cuts.

I was interested to read from the Scottish Arts councils Archive–

‘More than just school nativity plays, children’s theatre is a serious art form– Scotland’s companies strive and succeed in offering the same high standards of quality in children’s theatre as those in mainstream theatre. The Theatre pieces are made with children at the heart of its design– but all audience members are engaged. Although central themes can be universal the content is devoted to children’s interests and ways of receiving theatre–with an emphasis on a direct rapport with the audience.’

Supportive stuff– and any sector needs the assured backing of this kind if it’s going to flourish. Also important is the engagement of critics– about the philosophy– of the work– Perhaps we can learn something from the German young people’s theatre scene–who have an institute called The–Kinder–und Jugendtheaterzentrum in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland – [[www.kjtz.de](http://www.kjtz.de)]

I quote–

‘It is a unique institute, active both nationally and internationally in developing and promoting theatre for young audiences. Each child and young person in Germany should have the chance to experience the art of theatre and be able to play a part in theatre themselves. The centre represents the interests of artists and educationalists in their theatre work and represents theatre workers in politics and society.’

In other words the Government takes it seriously enough to provide the sector with an official voice. As a consequence it is taken seriously by each region–funding wise– and theatre houses often have a young peoples company attached. There are prizes with real money attached– and recognition from the press. When my play *Red Red Shoes* won The Children’s writing award in England–not one journalist of any description called–it was in that respect a non event. But in Germany–plays for the young are studied

in universities and there is library of past works– and as consequence of that a tradition– a culture is being created. Theatre for young people is seen as mainstream. This attitude affects the opinions of politicians and funders and public. And it effects young practitioners who don't use children's theatre work to get experience– so that they can later “move up’ the ladder and work in so called ‘proper’ theatre but approach the work in the knowledge that the rest of the arts worlds takes it seriously.

In Serbia, I met a young theatre director who called himself a social activist. He was dealing with very disturbed and broken young people–for whom violence had become normalised through the struggle for national identities. Each country therefore is distinct– and that's fascinating because everyone makes theatre for different reasons –I don't think of myself as a social activist–I think of myself as storyteller–engaged in an art form that allows humans to do– and witness the most incredible thing–to put oneself in the shoes of another. People say that its impossible to understand another persons pain–in theatre– we examine the feelings of others– we explore motive cause and effect and through story and conflict engage with those we might think of as despicable– or the enemy–or somehow unworthy of our gaze. Theatre urges us to look– to see and think for ourselves about ourselves and about others. This is why theatre for children and young people is so important for a future healthy society.

And children are not just the paying public of tomorrow–they are the audience of now– and they deserve– to have a theatre that is every bit as good, funny revealing, powerful, upsetting– joyous– and professional as any adult–who goes to the theatre and this needs not only the belief of those who make the work but the support of the society that needs it.

Thank you.

Charles Way. [This material is fully copyrighted under British copyright law]

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