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Jones, A.

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# THE DYNAMICS OF DEVOLUTION: AN ENQUIRY INTO THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WALES'S POST-DEVOLUTION NATIONAL THEATRES

Anwen Jones<sup>1</sup>  
Aberystwyth University

## *Abstract*

*In a recent article on the process of Welsh Devolution, Richard Wyn Jones argues that the process of negotiating changes in post-devolution Westminster/Wales dynamics has been characterised by the emergence of a discourse of 'unintended consequences' (Jones 2001: 34). In this article, I intend to argue that one of the most significant and contemporary of these unintended consequences, is the new prominence and role that national theatre has acquired in the political and cultural discourse of contemporary Welsh nationhood. It is my contention that, in the absence of a mature set of political institutions that might directly enable devolution, the National Assembly government called upon its national theatrical institutions to function as highly visible vehicles for cultural and political expression in Wales. The article will argue that the gradual development of the Welsh Devolution project from 1997 to the present has activated a creative compact between the Welsh Assembly Government, the Welsh public and its National Theatres. Analysis of the recent history of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru (THGC) and National Theatre Wales (NTW) will define the political agenda driving the creation of both companies and the ingenuity with which the companies have side-stepped this agenda to articulate their own artistic aims and ambitions.*

1997 marked a turning point in the constitutional history of contemporary Britain. The 'yes' votes in both the Welsh and Scottish referenda, followed by public endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement in May 1998, triggered a set of decentralizing reforms that gave fresh momentum to the modern British devolutionist project. In 1998, parliament passed three devolution Acts; the Scotland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998. A year later, three new national institutions of governance had been inaugurated: a Scottish Parliament in Holyrood, a National Assembly in Cardiff and a New Northern Ireland Assembly in the Stormont area of Belfast. Despite the simultaneous emergence of these historic institutions, '[t]he UK system of devolution is asymmetric ... there are different levels of devolved responsibilities and ... no common pattern. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have different forms of devolution' (Leeke, Sear & Gay 2003, 3). There is a clear distinction between the three 1998 Devolution Acts and the powers they confer on their respective devolved governments:

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Anwen Jones is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at Aberystwyth University. She is also Chair of the AU branch of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, the federal body for the development of Welsh medium Higher Education and Postgraduate Director for the Institute of Literature, Language and Creative Arts at Aberystwyth. She has published in both Welsh and English on the work of key twentieth-century European dramatists such as Paul Claudel and W. S. Jones and specialises in study of the Welsh national theatre movement within the comparative context of North Western Europe.

Under the *Scotland Act 1998* the Scottish Parliament legislates in respect of 'devolved' matters. It can pass both primary legislation ... and secondary legislation. Under the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, the Northern Ireland Assembly can legislate in respect of 'transferred' matters. It can pass both primary and secondary legislation ... Under the *Government of Wales Act 1998* the National Assembly for Wales can pass secondary legislation in 'devolved' areas. Primary legislation remains the responsibility of Westminster in both devolved and reserved areas (Leeke, Sear & Gay 2003, 8).

The impact of these differences became visible very early on. The recent history of devolution in Northern Ireland has followed its own course due to the specific set of political circumstances that have led to the suspension of its Assembly on several occasions. The Scottish and Welsh legislatures, however, have developed alongside each other and can be purposefully compared. In the first four years of its life, the Scottish parliament completed an active legislative programme, passing a total of sixty two bills. Featured amongst the notable successes of this initial period of government was 'the launch of Scotland's unique National Theatre' (Aughey, Bort and Osmond 2001,16). During the same period, the Welsh Assembly Government struggled to make 'sense of accumulated secondary legislative powers', whilst also 'seeking to pressure Westminster' (Jeffery & Wincott 2006, 6) into giving it new powers wherever it felt they were needed. From 1999 to 2012, the battle to 'drag Wales more into the mainstream of comparative constitutional development' (Rawlings 2003, 546) has dominated Welsh political life. It is a venture that has yet to reach its conclusion, but one that has already produced significant 'unintended consequences' (Jones 2001, 2). This article argues that the two, new, National Theatrical institutions of twenty first century, post-devolution Wales, *Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru* (THGC), and its English language counterpart, National Theatre Wales, (NTW), are to be included amongst the unintended consequences of Welsh devolution.

Whilst the Welsh national theatre movement dates back to circa 1894, (See Jones 2007), it had traditionally developed independently of a political context. The advent of devolution in Wales changed this trajectory. The launch of a Welsh language national theatre in the National Assembly's first term of office, the continuation of political and economic investment in the venture thereafter, along with the Assembly's subsequent commitment to the development of an English language, national, theatrical counterpart, links this latest phase in the history of a National Theatre movement in Wales to the gradual development of the Welsh devolution project itself. The relationship between the Welsh Assembly government and its National Theatres tells of the tense but productive negotiation of political and cultural imperatives from within a culture of mutual dependence characterised by a common aspiration for, and struggle towards independence.

The beginning of the new political era, heralded by the 1997 referendum 'yes' vote, actually led to a state of constitutional paralysis when political life in Wales was dominated by the contrast between the primacy of the programme for change and the absence of effective mechanisms for delivering that change. The Assembly's failure to deliver promptly on the aspirations outlined by Ron Davies, then Shadow Secretary of State for Wales, in the 1994 Labour Conference at Blackpool, namely to provide the Welsh public with, 'the right to decide through our own democratic institutions, the procedures and structures and priorities of our own civic life' (*Empowering the People 1994*, 4) opened a

gap between political will and political reality in Wales. The consequent crisis can be attributed to the inadequacy of the Assembly government's own constitution but there is little doubt that it was deepened by the frustrations of Westminster/Wales communication that further hampered the development of independent, domestic political arrangements within Wales. It is my contention that in the absence of a sound, political framework and an effective set of mechanisms to deliver the devolution project promptly, the National Theatres of twenty-first century Wales grasped both the opportunity and the challenge of functioning as cultural stopgaps; virtual places in which the nation might practise and perform, 'a mature sense of citizenship in relation to Welsh institutions' and share, 'responsibility for mobilising opinion and choosing the direction Welsh society should take' (Osmond 1998, 18-19). As Steve Blandford argues:

In the period since the establishment of the Wales Assembly Government in 1999, as part of the UK government's programme of devolution that began in 1997 theatre in Wales has been something of a political battleground. The relatively limited powers of the Assembly government (especially in the initial phase of devolution) inevitably gave such areas as cultural policy a particularly sharp focus. A theatre heavily dependent on state funding via the Arts Council of Wales was frequently on the front line of debate, not just about theatre, but about the kind of new nation that was emerging (Blandford 2013, 53).

Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru was the earliest, new, National Theatre to emerge in the heady days of the first term of Assembly government. It was in 2003 that Gareth Miles, one of the theatre company's first steering committee members, outlined the definitive range of artistic aims assigned to Wales's latest National Theatre. In his regular column in *Barn*, Miles described the company as:

An independent production company under artistic leadership possessing a breadth of knowledge and experience sufficient to enable the planning of production seasons offering the following:

- An exciting and modern theatrical style based on Wales's theatrical tradition and its culture.
- Programmes of work including a variety of genres.
- Training and career development opportunities.
- A good name for the company and for drama produced in Wales on the international stage
- New work in Welsh
- Access to the widest possible audience (Miles 2003)

Whilst this vision statement contextualises the company's domestic productivity within an over-arching framework of international validation and exportation, its somewhat lacklustre nature is indicative of the pervading sense of confusion and contradiction that characterised the planning process for the emergence of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru from the outset.

From 1999 to 2003, a combination of significant factors impacted on the way in which the new, Welsh language national theatre was conceived and constructed. The findings of the Wallace report recommending a systematic Council re-structuring, led to a lack of confidence both within and outside the Arts Council. This Assembly-commissioned report presented ACW with the dual task of putting its own house in order and re-gaining public confidence during the Assembly's first term of office. The Assembly itself soon felt the full weight of public expectation on its youthful shoulders as it set about the task of drawing up government policy in primary areas of concern to Wales, such as language planning and cultural policy. Finally, the jostling for power between the component parties of the Liberal Democrat/Labour coalition formed in lieu of the original Labour minority government from October 2000 onwards, was another destabilising factor in the country's national dynamics. All these influences played their part in shaping *Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru*. Their combined effect was to bring forth a National Theatre that had traded in any distinct theatrical vision or agenda for a role as a cultural mediator in what was, at heart, a political initiative designed to address the issue of Welsh language planning and policy.

Initially, a sense of confusion arose from the incompatibility between the recommendations put forward in the Assembly's *A Culture in Common* report and ACW's plans, formulated as early as 1999, to establish a Welsh language National Theatre. The Post-16 Education and Training Committee of the initial Assembly Liberal/Labour coalition, under the chairmanship of Cynog Dafis, was primarily a mechanism for, 'consideration of how cultural policy might contribute towards national revival' (Dafis, 2005, 237). Dafis voiced his confidence (somewhat premature in the event!) that his brief and vision for the Committee had succeeded in, 'harmonising the national question and social justice by creating a democratic vision, with an emphasis on art that would interpret the reality of Welsh life and be rooted in society' (Dafis, 2005, 237). Having received evidence under the guidance of specialist advisor, Ceri Sherlock, the Committee submitted its report in 2001. Therein were clear recommendations with regard to the future of Welsh national theatre:

[t]he argument for a National Theatre, even one in federal form arouses passion but it is clearly predicated on a kind of text theatre tradition of which there is no continuous or unbroken line, and which is at best intermittent in Wales. We have an acknowledged 'performance culture' ... theatres for young people ... physical and dance theatre. It is here, rather than in grafting on another tradition and creating another stand-alone institution, that Wales has a firm and secure foundation on which to build a strong national and international performance platform. (*A Culture in Common*, 3.71, 32).

In an independent capacity, Ceri Sherlock has often voiced his lack of enthusiasm for the Welsh national theatre project, a view based primarily on his sense that it derives from an inappropriate model. In 2004, he argued:

There are many other models if we need to find an appropriate patent, in Europe and North America (to think of western cultures only). The English model is, in a number of ways, the least appropriate for us, barnacled as it is to a perception of culture that is at its root exclusive, privileged and elitist. (Sherlock, 2004, 157).

Whilst the Committee itself adopted a more diplomatic tone, Sherlock's influence was easily discernible and the question of, 'the relevance of moving towards the establishment of a "national theatre"' is forcefully put (*A Culture in Common*, 3.73, 32). In 2005, Dafis reiterated his conviction of, 'the importance of investing in the roots, to some extent at the expense of the huge expenditure on the incessant 'flagships' that as far as I could see occupied a world entirely divorced from the society that sponsored them so generously.' (Dafis 2005, 238). Geraint Talfan Davies, then Chair of Welsh National Opera, welcomed the Committee's report as an indication that the first Assembly government rightly prioritised the development of cultural policy and the, 'integration of creativity and the arts into other policy fronts'. (Davies, 2000). His chagrin at the report's lack of support for national remit companies confirms the fact that the Committee had issued an unequivocal message in this respect.

In its controversial Drama Strategy 1999, published prior to the establishment of the 2000 Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition agreement that led to the Richard Commission report, the Arts Council for Wales had already set out its intentions with regard to the Welsh national theatre question. ACW plans differed sharply from the vision articulated a few years later in *A Culture in Common*. Whilst the Council argued that its identification of Clwyd Theatr Cymru, along with its proposals for a new Welsh language, national producing company based in North West Wales, as the two leading, well-resourced Welsh National Performing Arts Companies did not 'presuppose a debate on "National" theatres', it acknowledged that it did, 'develop the concept of a national remit and a national responsibility and give status to Welsh artistry' (*The Drama Strategy for Wales*, 4.2). By 2000, ACW appeared to have realigned its own aims with those of the Post-16 Education and Training Committee report, setting one of its key targets for 2000/01 as, 'working with the National Assembly for Wales towards implementing its cultural policy for Wales, "A Culture in Common"' (*Creative Wales*, 10). This realignment may seem a politic move in view of the fact that the Committee's report was sufficiently important for Cabinet Secretary, Tom Middlehurst, to refer the First Minister to its findings in an Assembly debate on 12 October, 2000 on the future of the Arts Council for Wales. During this discussion both Dafis and Middlehurst stressed the relevance of the Committee's report in relation to the reformation of ACW.

If this was a strategic shift, it was not one that was set to last. In its Annual reports for 2000/01 and 2001/02, ACW made successive announcements with regard to its plans to realise the establishment of a Welsh-language National Theatre. It is worth noting that whilst *A Culture in Common* did not discuss the national theatre issue in linguistic terms, ACW, having emerged intact from its period of review and re-structuring, was committed to pursuing its original plans to establish a new, Welsh language National Theatre. By July 2002, media reports confirmed that the Council had announced the 'names of the companies who will receive funding for the production of two touring main-stage Welsh language productions for 2003' (National Arts Agency News, 2002). It was further reported that Sybil Crouch, Chairman of ACW, had enthusiastically noted that 'such was the standard of the other applications, they will be passed on for production to Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, a new Welsh Language Theatre Company to be established by the ACW' (Ibid, 2002). On the other hand, there was no mention of Welsh theatre in a Cabinet statement by Jenny Randerson, then Minister for Culture, Sport and the Welsh Language,

on the progress of Cymru'n Creu, the cultural consortium set up to act on the recommendations of the post-16 Education and Training Committee, 'A Culture in Common'. This omission combined with Dafis's impression that the report had by the time it came before the full Assembly in 2001 fallen out of vogue, suggested that the Assembly had distanced itself somewhat from the debate about theatre in Wales incorporated into the committee's original report. Meanwhile, in its 2003/04 annual report, ACW celebrated the creation of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, a unique 'new, touring theatre company working in the Welsh language' (*Creative Wales 2003/04*, 13). The company launched its first national tour in Spring 2004, visiting venues at Mold, Milford Haven, Aberystwyth, Swansea, Bangor and Cardiff and featuring, *Yn Debyg iawn i Ti a Fi*, by well-known Welsh language playwright, Meic Povey.

There can be no doubt that the political landscape in the early years of the Twenty First century was both exciting and frustrating. The publication of the Richard Commission's report on the Powers and Electoral arrangements for the National Assembly for Wales on 31 March 2004 prepared the way for a vital step forward in the development of the Welsh devolution project. By 2004, the nation was clearly inching towards a secure system of parliamentary government for devolution; a system that was built around, 'a set of institutions which in view of the conditions of small-country governance is sufficiently accessible and responsive, and also serves to enhance the voice of Wales in the United Kingdom in Europe' (Rawlings 2003: 546). As First Minister Rhodri Morgan put it, the report of the Richard Commission was of vital significance to the development of devolution in Wales, but, '[a]ll of us involved in political life in Wales know just how contentious the remit provided to the Commission was capable of becoming' (Quoted in Osmond 2008: 3). In the event, the separation of the legislature from the executive in 2007, subsequent to introduction of the Government of Wales Act 2006, made a significant contribution to the transformation of the political landscape of Wales, a development fairly assessed as, 'the end of the beginning' (Jones & Scully 2008: 2). However, Westminster's response to the claim that further legislative powers were vital if the Assembly was to deliver on its promises was characteristically cautious. It was against the backdrop of this tense and difficult negotiation of constitutional change that Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru led the inaugural years of its new, national artistic life. By this point, the findings of the Boyden report on English Language Drama, commissioned by ACW, and published in 2004, had kicked proposals for an English language National Theatre into the long grass. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru faced the challenges of the future alone.

Gradually a narrative emerged, from a collage of Assembly documents and declarations by Assembly ministers, that endorsed the accuracy of predictions that the development of the devolution project in Wales would throw both cultural discourse and production into high relief. In the early years of Theatr Genedlaethol's life, it became clear that, 'in cultural discourse and in the creation of art, the context ha[d] changed, sharpened' (Sherlock 2004, 151). It is possible to argue that, during this process, THGC became a political vehicle designed to satisfy the demand that all avenues of civic experience in Wales should find vehicles for expression in the country's native language. A vision of the new National Theatre as a vital tool in a language promotion strategy and planning policy can be pieced together from both Assembly and ACW documentation, such as *Iaith Pawb*, its subsequent review reports and ACW Annual reports from as early as 2000 to 2004 and beyond. From this perspective, the company was not a vehicle for artistic, but rather for

linguistic, expression and articulation. The fact that the exercise of linguistic rights and the flexing of linguistic muscles happened within a theatrical context was a mere coincidence, but one that was indicative of the relative weakness of the National Assembly for Wales as a mechanism for realising national aims and prioritising national agendas in a modern Wales. *Iaith Pawb: A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales, 2003* notes that the Assembly government's decision to establish a National Welsh Language Theatre company is motivated by a desire to provide, 'a high profile for live theatre', however its inclusion in the strategy under the third strand, 'The Individual and Language Rights', signals its role in terms of language planning and policy and its status as a highly visible means of augmenting, 'the range of social and leisure activities to those interested in the Welsh language.' (*Iaith Pawb 2003*, 50, 4.50). In the 2004/05 annual report on *Iaith Pawb*, the company is cited yet again as evidence of the strategy's success. Further references to Eisteddfod Genedlaethol audiences and pre-show sessions for Welsh learners do little to broaden out a vision that is tightly tied to language promotion and policy. Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru remains a continuous presence in subsequent *Iaith Pawb* and Welsh Language Scheme review reports, and, as recently as 2008/09, ticket sales are cited as evidence in favour of the strategy's success. Whilst the terminology of these reports does become more theatre-focused as time goes on, it would hardly be surprising if the theatrical community in Wales began to count the cost of what Talfan Davies cautiously welcomed as the, 'integration of creativity and the arts into other policy fronts' (Davies 2000).

The early performance history of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru does not suggest that there was any major shift in political perceptions of its *raison d'être*, either before or after the introduction of the Government of Wales Act 2006. The company's first production, *Yn Debyg Iawn i Ti a Fi* – a play portraying the suppressed agony of a family struggling to come to terms with the challenging and often disturbing needs of a schizophrenic young sibling – was well received. An analysis of ticket sales figures from the period 2004-2009 does not suggest that there was either a steady decline or a clear pattern of artistic preference in evidence in terms of audience engagement. However, it did become increasingly apparent that it was no longer sufficient for THGC to produce Welsh medium work, in the canonical guise of translations of Shakespeare plays, in original dramatisations of significant moments of Welsh history, or in new work by prominent Welsh medium dramatists. The authors of *Iaith Pawb and Welsh Language Scheme* reports continued to applaud the National Theatre on its achievements in terms of their own politically focused perspective. The 2006/07 report describes THGC's programme as evidence of:

the breadth of main stage productions that the company have been charged with producing. *Esther* is a classic Welsh language play by one of our foremost playwrights of the twentieth century. It demonstrated the company's ability to put together a team of first class artists from Wales many of whom had not before been able to use their talents at this scale on the stage in Wales within the Welsh language ... *Diweddgan*, the Welsh language version of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* shows the company giving Welsh language audiences the chance to see a classic of world theatre in their own language ... *Cysgod Y Cryman*, a new drama by Sion Eirian based on the novel by Islwyn Fflewce Ellis broke box office records for the company throughout its tour in Wales. A new initiative by the company took the production for one night to the Bloomsbury Theatre in London. The performance was well

supported by the London Welsh with Sian Phillips and Rhys Ifans in the audience (*Iaith Pawb and Welsh Language Scheme Annual Report 2006-07*, 50).

Nonetheless, there was evidence of a growing sense of unease manifest in a body of review and commentary written from within a critical framework that focused on the kind and quality of THGC's contribution to an outward looking, national framework of artistic theatrical excellence. Steve Blandford's recent assessment that there is a 'clear sense within Wales' that the company has 'failed to establish a reputation that sits comfortably with the "idea" of national theatres' (Blandford, 2013, 66) may well be justified, at least, in terms of its output prior to 2009. Whilst Paul Griffiths' routine flagellation of any Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru productions in the pages of *Y Cymro*, during this period, deserves to be taken with a pinch of salt, the collective criticism of directors and theatre academics, such as Ian Rowlands, Dafydd Llewelyn and Roger Owen are more difficult to dismiss. This discourse of discontent re-focused attention on the tension that had surfaced in early twentieth century debates around De Walden's national theatre campaign, namely the friction between a deeply held conviction that Welsh culture required and deserved protection, and a competing awareness that any such defensive impulses would ultimately stifle its future development.

In December 2006, Roger Owen's publication of a short article on his recent contribution to a television programme by the independent broadcaster, Tonfedd Eryri, examining the programme of Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru to date, highlighted many of the issues surrounding the THGC's artistic and cultural record. Owen discussed his responsibility as a Welsh-language theatre critic, in terms of the endeavour to strike 'the appropriate diplomatic note somewhere between the often unappetising truth as you see it about a case in point, and the refutation of any implication that the whole project of Welsh-language culture is thus fatally undermined and in a state of disintegration' (Owen 2006). His comment underlines the conflict between a desire to respond to THGC's output with artistic integrity, and an awareness of its importance as a guardian of Welsh cultural and linguistic values. Owen presents a brief but persuasive argument that the company had been set up to fail. Whilst THGC itself was no doubt complicit in that set up, as Owen suggests, it was the pressure of 'contemporary political wisdom' that demanded that the company, 'project an image of its own success at all times' (Owen, 2006). Owen cites THGC's complacency in the face of the resounding failure of its 2005 production of *Romeo and Juliet* as evidence of a 'corporate, passive-aggressive' failure to honour its duty to engage in creative, critical debate with its public (Owen, 2006). Having sat through a performance of that production, and engaged with the company's response to criticism thereafter, I would have to concur on both counts!

Owen closes his article by arguing for the contemporary relevance of Mike Pearson's argument, back in the eighties, that his professional theatre practice was grounded in his recognition of the specific linguistic and cultural commitment of Welsh-language theatre goers. Owen claims that the effect of national branding is to dilute this commitment and to render both the audience, and inevitably the company delivering the brand, anonymous and anodyne. THGC did produce some notable work. Daniel Evans's production of Saunders Lewis's classic, *Esther*, and Aled Jones Williams's new play, *Iesu!* were both high quality and thought-provoking productions in which theatricality came to the fore as an exciting medium for social debate and experience. Nonetheless, what emerged from the

debate surrounding the value and kind of its contribution during this period is the fact that audiences' relationship with THGC were more complex than either Assembly ministers or ACW officials had envisaged. At the centre of that relationship was a vision of artistic and theatrical excellence practised in the Welsh language, as opposed to a non-critical endorsement of the practice of the Welsh language itself.

Owen revealed his crisis of confidence as a Welsh language theatre critic at a time when the confidence of the arts sector in Wales must well have been at a low ebb. The row that broke late in 2004 over the Assembly bonfire of the quangos had raged ahead during 2005. The Assembly announcement in that year that it was to assume direct responsibility for the funding of six key arts organisations, namely Welsh National Opera, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Clwyd Theatr Cymru, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, Diversions Dance and Academi, led to a rash of protest, admonishments and, often, nothing short of fury, from amidst the ranks of arts practitioners, administrators and professionals of all kinds. By February 2007, Alun Pugh had beaten a hasty retreat, the government having lost its motion and been forced into commissioning an independent, consultative review on the issue to be led by Elan Closs Stephens. As Talfan Davies put it, 'The Arts Council of Wales was intact, but facing its fourth review in a decade' (Davies, 2008, 238). Talfan Davies himself lost his chairmanship of the Council during this battle but emerged with his dignity and reputation unharmed. Despite his definitive assessment that he had in fact been sacked by Pugh, he welcomed the interim appointment of his successor, Dai Smith with political and personal acumen stating:

Although everyone would have wished to see a Chair appointed under proper process, I do urge the Council, the staff and the whole sector not to let go lightly of the unity that has been apparent in recent months, and to give the new Chair their support.

The last three years with the Council have been a real privilege for me and I am very proud of what the Council and the staff have achieved in difficult and distracting circumstances. I also want to thank everyone for the very generous personal support they have given to me (Davies, 2006).

Subsequently, Dai Smith's term of office has been renewed several times and he remains ACW Chairman to date.

Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru played no part in the public debate over the future of ACW during this period. By the same token, its programme gave no indication of a response to, or comment on, the significant constitutional changes affecting the political governance of Wales during 2006 and 2007. Under the leadership of Cefin Roberts, and Lyn T. Jones, Company Artistic Director and Chair, THGC continued to produce its usual diet of translations, Welsh classics and the occasional contribution by a new dramatist, although the word on the street was that new writers such as Gwyneth Glyn were given very little creative freedom and were really writing to a pre-determined brief. In 2010, after a varied year that saw the successful production of *Bobi a Sami*, one of a substantial body of plays by W. S. Jones, a North Wales playwright whose popular theatrical works deserve wider acclaim than hitherto received, coupled with a production of a new play, written and directed by Meic Povey, *Tyner yw'r Lleuad Heno*, that met with considerable, and, largely deserved criticism, Cefin Roberts resigned. An ACW Investment Review that had begun

subsequent to the arrival of Nick Capaldi as incoming Chief Executive in 2008 precipitated a period of re-assessment from which the company has recently emerged. Whilst the ACW's Annual Review Report for 2009/10 recognises the challenges faced by THGC in fulfilling its touring brief as a result of the closure of Theatr Gwynedd and the lengthy, if temporary closure of Sherman Cymru, it issued a direct challenge to the company, albeit in suitably non-confrontational language: It is time, it declared:

for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru to take stock. It has had many successes and has certainly created large scale drama in the Welsh language and attracted a loyal audience following. But there may be ways of working that would better fit the changing nature of venue availability or the needs of audience development or of emerging playwrights. The prime requirement from the Arts Council will remain that the company continues to increase and develop its audience base. We await with anticipation the company's plans for the next five years. (*Annual Review Report 2009/10*, 11).

The Welsh Arts Council review undoubtedly exposed some artistic shortcomings evident during THGC's initial production period. More importantly, it also revealed the importance of artistic standards to Welsh medium theatre audiences; audiences that had been defined and understood by the providers of culture in Wales in exclusively linguistic terms. Public engagement with the company cajoled THGC towards a voluntary vacation of the political role assigned to it by Assembly ministers. At the same time, that public offered THGC a new engagement, bringing it face to face with a separate set of artistic challenges but, also securing its continuing relevance in and to Wales. In response to that invitation, Ioan Williams, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru's current Chairman, voiced the Board's conviction that:

national theatre was essential to Welsh culture and that Welsh language theatre had a vital contribution to make to the continuation and growth of the language ... but that theatre is not a tool to protect language, but rather a unique medium that allows us to experience our own identity. National Theatre in Wales should be a means for everyone in Wales to know themselves' (Williams 2010).

Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, steered by its Chair and a committed and experienced Board of Directors, appointed Arwel Gruffydd as the company's new Artistic Director in 2011. Since then, THGC has begun to root some of its work in communities with projects such as *Blodyn* and *C'laen Ta* in North Wales. It has also established successful collaborations with members of a network of non-national theatre companies such as Sherman Cymru and Galeri, Caernarfon. Sherman Cymru/THGC's co-production of Dafydd James's innovative exploration of the life of a group of young, and not so young, gay men in Cardiff, *Llwyth*, was particularly successful both within Wales and further afield. The production received an accolade at the Edinburgh International Festival, 2011. The company has shown signs of a growing confidence in its ability to experiment and innovate as evidenced by its circular circus tent-located production of *Y Storm*, a translation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, by Gwyneth Lewis under the adept directorship of Elen Bowman. Its latest stunning, site-specific production of Sanders Lewis's classic poetry-play,

*Blodeuwedd*, performed at Tomen y Mur, the historical site for the play's thematic material, in the immediate vicinity of the de-commissioned Trawsfynydd Nuclear station is a lasting testament to Lewis's theatrical treatise on the dangers of man's flawed attempts to harness nature. Whatever reservations Welsh theatre-goers may feel and express about the experience of becoming part of a television production during a theatrical event, a recent partnership between S4C and THGC has led, not to the televising of productions but rather to the creation of television programmes from the raw material of those events. This venture may well bring us closer to the ideal articulated by Ceri Sherlock of a 'performative liveness' (Sherlock, 2004, 155) that can embrace the opportunities provided by the contemporary rapidity of technological development.

In the 2009/10 Annual review report in which ACW lay down its challenge to THGC, an element of surprise is expressed with regard to the advent of the National Company's English language counterpart, National Theatre Wales. Amongst the report's concluding comments, it is noted, 'When Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru was created just over six years ago ... no-one would have envisaged that there would be a new English language national theatre company coming into existence' (*Annual Review Report 2009/10*, 10 -11). Whether or not this development was, in fact, cause for surprise, there is no doubt that both the political drive that engineered the creation of the second National Theatre venture, National Theatre Wales, and the constitutional mechanisms at its service, once in existence, were markedly different from those of its predecessor. From the onset, the NTW project was framed within a context of international, cultural excellence that had nothing to do with bilingualism or, indeed, linguistic promotion or preservation of any kind. Under the leadership of Capaldi and Smith, ACW set about realising this aim. In December 2010, ACW's new funding strategy was announced. Amongst its strategic aims was the promotion of Wales's international reputation for dynamism, creativity and excellence. Its methodology for achieving this aim consisted of support for:

a portfolio of national companies who can represent the best of Wales on the world stage – international exemplars of excellence whose works are rooted in Wales. Along with companies such as Welsh National Opera, BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, Council is attaching particular importance to the development needs of two of Wales's newest national companies, National Theatre Wales and National Dance Company Wales. (*New Funding Strategy Announced*, 2010).

One might be forgiven if this brought either Dafis's condemnation of those 'incessant "flagships"' (Dafis, 2005, 238) or, alternatively, Pugh's proposals for more direct Assembly control over a set of key, national remit companies, fleetingly to mind. The contextualisation of the development of an English language national theatre company within the framework of a national programme of cultural reorganisation and revitalisation told of a vision of Wales as an ethnically uniform unit, hungry for a common cultural diet. The new English-language company was not intended to cater for the needs of a specific linguistic community, but rather to address the common artistic needs of the Welsh populace as a whole. It could be argued that this vision of a homogeneous Wales, constructed from within an interpretative frame prevalent in Twentieth Century discourses of the nation, has been superseded by contemporary ideas of ethnic and cultural pluralism.

Nevertheless, it was a viewpoint echoed in the discussion held on the Assembly floor in November, 2009, when Lorraine Barrett asked the Minister for Heritage, Alun Ffred Jones, to provide an update on Welsh Assembly government initiatives aimed at supporting artistic creativity in Wales. The Minister's answer drew the establishment of National Theatre Wales into a programme of national, cultural revitalisation at a grass roots level. He claimed:

I can think of no better example than the establishment of National Theatre Wales in fulfilment of the 'One Wales' commitment. More than £3 million has been allocated via the Arts Council of Wales to establish that new English-language theatre, whose first programme, launched this month, has received tremendously warm publicity (*The Record of Proceedings*, 25 November, 2009).

National Theatre Wales's brief can be interpreted either as the delivery of a programme of cultural immunisation in which the diversity characteristic of the country's social and economic make up was to be incorporated into a theatrical programme of national, cultural cohesion or, more sympathetically, in terms of an attempt to address the access agenda by providing as diverse a cross-section of the public as possible with theatrical experiences in their own locales, with an open invitation to visiting parties. Whatever our interpretation, Dai Smith followed his words of encouragement to THGC during its review period with hearty congratulations to NTW on a first year of 'bravado and genius of accomplishment' that had 'breathed life into a Welsh warhorse that had hitherto, for a hundred years ended up knackered, spavined and put down after innumerable short runs'. (*2010/11 The arts in Wales: success in adversity*, 3).

From its outset, NTW was devised and marketed as a cohesive, networking, force, an artistic vehicle that would facilitate the staging of the dramas of different societies within their distinctive locales across Wales:

Launch gatherings were held simultaneously across Wales in locations where National Theatre Wales will produce work between March 2010 and April 2011. The first 'launch' year of work will theatrically map Wales. One show per month, each month (plus an additional finale) will take place in locations across the country, bringing the very best of Welsh writing, performing and directing together with world class artists and world class ideas from across the globe (*'Launch Year Digital Press Pack'*, 2009).

National Theatre Wales's web presence is clearly constructed around a concept of community and its production programme is fuelled by a desire to re-perform and represent the experiences at the heart of communities across Wales. The South Wales valleys, Swansea, Cardiff, Barmouth, Bridgend, Milford Haven, Aberystwyth and Port Talbot, and Blaenau Ffestiniog, have all made distinctive bids for the occupation of territories that have been mapped out by this evolutionary process of performance. In practice, productions have varied in quality, but the programme as a whole has been driven by a definitive vision of community theatre, delivered at a national level. Occasionally I would argue that there has been an element of idealism or, at worst, a sense of the patronising about the company's artistic programme of social liberation. It may have been

the sensitivity of a visitor that caused the portrayal of a coughing, spluttering miner on his deathbed during NTW's opening show at Blaengarw, *A Good Night Out in the Valleys*, to appear somewhat trite. By contrast, it may well have been the self-righteousness of the native audience member that occasioned a similar response to the Aberystwyth-located, mediated production, *Outdoors*, in which Rimini Protokoll, in partnership with Heartsong Choir and Aberystwyth Arts Centre, presented a version of Aberystwyth that bore no resemblance to anything I knew of, or felt about the place. Nevertheless, NTW created an exciting and contagious buzz around theatre in Wales. During its inaugural year, the company mounted a string of spectacular shows, such as Pearson's site-specific extravaganza, *The Persians*, Gary Owen's touching but uncompromising response to a rash of suicides amongst young men in the South Wales area, *Love Steals us from Loneliness*, *Shelf Life*, a production partnership between WNO and Volcano Theatre, that revealed the artistic potential of Swansea City's Old Library to its audience, and the curiously dated but captivatingly raw production of an early un-published play by John Osborne, *The Devil Inside Him*.

National Theatre Wales has exhibited a similar capacity to that of its Welsh language counterpart, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, in its ability to outgrow its original brief. The company has interpreted the agenda of national, cultural homogeneity, encapsulated in the National Assembly's Plaid Cymru/Labour coalition political programme, *One Wales/Cymru'n Un* (2007-1011), in a distinctive and unexpected manner. Its response to the Assembly-led challenge of making a diet of high art accessible to Wales's diverse audiences, has centred on the delivery of a regionally distinctive, theatrical programme on a national scale. NTW has fulfilled its national remit by engaging with a rich and diverse range of Welsh experience but it has side-stepped the issue of its own national legitimacy by presenting those distinct experiences *to* those audiences and *in* those locales from which they originated. Crucially, it has not nationalised Welsh experiences but has given the weight of its own national standing to the local in its own locale. Thus its work has recognised and realised the distinctiveness of Wales's rich, regional make up and confronted, or at least accounted for, the social and economic differences characteristic of Welsh society at large.

The opening decade of the Twenty First Century in Wales, then, has been characterised by a vigorous programme of political and cultural, creativity shot through by a pervading sense of fragmentation and instability. However, in early 2011, a significant step forward was taken in the tortuous journey toward effective devolved government. On 4 March 2011, the Welsh Assembly government emerged from its most recent referendum as a partially devolved political body responsible for law-making in the twenty areas over which it has power. This latest change in the nation's political infrastructure suggests that Wales may be emerging from the permanent state of creative emergency characteristic of its national life (Williams, 1985). As government in Wales becomes stronger its chances of delivering 'real and lasting changes to transform people's lives all over Wales' (*One Wales* 2007: 98) increase, but how will this steady accumulation of political prowess affect Wales's National theatres? In the recent past, the disparity between the artistic aspirations of English and Welsh language National Theatre audiences in Wales, and the political drive behind those institutions, has given them real value in terms of their development of a sense of Welsh nationhood. This productive tension cannot continue indefinitely. Whilst the establishment of National Theatre Scotland is considered one of the plus points of the

Scottish Executive and Parliament's second term, it no longer dominates media headlines or public and political discourse as it once did. It may be that the Assembly's success will lead to a change in the function and status of Wales's National Theatres. However, the UK Attorney General's referral of the first piece of Welsh Assembly legislation to the Supreme Court in July 2012, on the basis that the Assembly has exceeded its authority, suggests that success of this kind is far from guaranteed. Until a final resolution is reached with regard to the range and remit of devolved powers in Wales, we must respond to the question, 'Who needs a national theatre?' (Billington 2004) by noting that in Wales, for the moment, at least, the answer seems to be everyone.

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