

# mid•point

## 'Making New Plays'

July 27, 2006  
The Courtyard, Hereford

### *Speakers:*

Francesca Beard  
Peter Cann  
Gwenda Hughes  
Chris O'Connell  
Amanda Whittington  
Peter Leslie Wild

*Chair: Nina Steiger*

This one-day event for independent theatre companies in the West Midlands looked at ways of working with writers to develop new work.

*Why do writers write?*

*Why do we choose to work with writers?*

*What are the different ways that companies and writers can work together?*

There were two panels of speakers: a panel of writers, and a panel of producers. The event was attended by some 40 delegates. It was organised by **mid\*point** - the network for independent theatre in the West Midlands. This report summarises some of the issues raised.

### **1. Writers' Panel**

The writers on the panel have all had experience of working with independent theatre companies, in different contexts; and the context has often shaped the work. **Peter Cann**, for example, described his experiences working with the Portuguese company O Teatro Regional Da Serra Do Montemuro. This is a company that has emerged from the community. When a community and a theatre are integral to each other, in this way, that's when theatre is important. Audiences will argue heatedly about the meaning of a play, because it *matters* to them. We need to find situations where theatre can be effective.

**Chris O'Connell** works with Theatre Absolute. The company seeks to bring an empty space to life, in a non-naturalistic performance style. The work is collaborative; plays have been developed in collaboration with, for example, composers. Writing, for Chris, is addictive; the visceral response from an audience is a 'turn-on'.

**Amanda Whittington** has participated in the New Writers' Programme at the Soho Theatre, resulting in the play, *Be My Baby*. She has also worked with companies, such as New Perspectives, which produce work for a specific audience (in this case, rural communities). As a writer, Amanda feels, you have to make your work *connect* with the work of the company.

Amanda observed that there is no career path for writers. Every writer has to find his/her own path. Ventures such as the Theatre Writing Partnership in Nottingham are important in supporting the work of new writers. It isn't about teaching people to write - but enabling writers to find their voice.

**Francesca Beard** has worked extensively as a performance poet, and her reason for writing is 'to perform for you'. She has contributed a monologue to the new production by Pentabus, *White Open Spaces*.

*Terina Talbot (Women & Theatre)* asked the panel what they feel it is important to write about *now*.

Francesca observed that we live in a multicultural society. She wants to explore how people who are different, and have different beliefs, can live together.

Amanda argued that theatre is most exciting when it connects with things that people know and recognise. It is important to make audiences feel the play is about *them*.

Chris saw that writing can be a form of provocation, challenging the perceptions of the audience. But a fiction needs to be found to go around that provocation - so it is not simply about an issue.

For Peter, theatre exists to help us to imagine change - and make it happen; to actualise and deal with our fears and desires.

## **2. Producers' Panel**

**Gwenda Hughes** - currently Artistic Director of the New Vic Theatre (Newcastle-under-Lyme) - recalled that when she began working with radical theatre companies in the 60s and 70s, there weren't any plays that reflected the experiences of black people, women or the gay community - and so you *had* to find new writers, to reflect those experiences. She later worked at the

Birmingham Rep. The theatre felt it had a duty to the community of artists and writers in the West Midlands. There was a slightly amorphous sense that new writing was a 'good thing' per se. At the New Vic, Gwenda felt at first that her job was to make the theatre work, and keep it open. Supporting new writing as a good thing per se had to be fairly low on her list priorities. But in her nine years in charge, the theatre has commissioned thirteen scripts, and twelve have been produced. Her commissions are always very specific - 'I know what I want.'

**Peter Leslie Wild** is Senior Producer at BBC Radio Drama in Birmingham. Peter had thought that theatre plays have a different life than radio plays. Recently, however, he has staged theatre plays for radio, and a radio play for the stage. There are basic storytelling techniques that remain the same across the media.

There is a received idea of what a radio play is like - but the output is in fact much more varied and experimental. People often regard radio drama as a great place for people to start as writers. But it is not a training ground. There are people who write for theatre who cannot write for radio.

Peter has tried to build a working relationship between BBC Radio in Birmingham, and local companies and practitioners. The new Pentabus project, *White Open Spaces*, has emerged from a collaboration between Pentabus, BBC Radio and the Arvon Foundation.

## Discussion

### ***No more writers?***

Michael Aduwali (Women & Theatre) asked: what would happen if there were no new writers? He suggested that we would just get on with it - we would fill the void, with devised work. Francesca Beard observed that *stories* would happen - stories that need to be told would happen. Margaret Jackman (Shoebox) said you would still have a script - even if it wasn't written down. Peter Cann commented that if there were no more writers - then all that would happen is that, sooner or later, writers would emerge...

### ***Devising vs. Written Scripts***

Gwenda Hughes argued that the division between devised work vs. written scripts is a false one. Everything depends on the context and aims of the work. Paul Warwick (Experiment: GROW) suggested there is a fear within the devising community of writers - a fear that a writer will kill what they do. Bringing in a writer to work on a project is like bringing in a movement choreographer. A writer's skill is to respond through language. It is a specific skill, and it will enrich the work. Terina Talbot agreed that writers have particular skills, as do

directors and actors. However, we are all too busy defining who we are, rather than focusing on what we *do*. We mustn't make gods of writers.

### **Forum - The future of mid\*point**

In the Forum, we discussed the future of the mid\*point network. Paul Warwick reflected on the three events we have held so far. He suggested that while our discussions have been stimulating and valuable, we need to consider how we can turn talk into action. How can we make mid\*point more effective? How can members become empowered, and also responsible, to make things happen? Jane Ward (3third Wheel) added that what we do at mid\*point events could be more explosive in its impact.

The next mid\*point event will have a different format. It will be an Open Space event (see <http://www.openspaceworld.org/>, or <http://openspaceuk.com/>). Open Space is a revolutionary forum for discussion - it has no pre-set agenda. Delegates will set the agenda on the day - raising the questions and issues *they* think are important. In the Forum, we tried to find a question which could serve as a starting point for the day. We agreed on:

***How do we support each other, to make great theatre?***

The Open Space event will take place in September.

*Report written by David Allen, August 2006*

For more information about mid\*point, contact David Allen  
c/o Midland Actors Theatre, 25 Merrishaw Road, Northfield, Birmingham B31 3SL

Tel./Fax: 0121 608 7144

Email: [news@midlandactorstheatre.co.uk](mailto:news@midlandactorstheatre.co.uk)