

Alyce von Rothkirch

The Place of Wales:
Staging Place in Contemporary Welsh Drama in English

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Meiner Mutter gewidmet.

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Introduction

The Politics of Place

“Drama, like every other art, has never yet settled any social or moral issue but – it is a glorious medium for asking awkward questions”.
(D.T. Davies, “Drama” 333)

Raymond Williams coined the term ‘structure of feeling’ to describe the “continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period” (*Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* 9). In the context of drama it is the interrelationship between form and content of a play on the one hand and the social environment to which it responds on the other hand that is described by this term. It is, notes Williams, both a conscious and an unconscious process; it is “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience” (10). Thus, Williams argues that theatre – like other art forms – cannot be understood when divorced from the social environment in which it is conceived and performed. Furthermore, the way that playwrights do or do not conform to the accepted conventions of their time might indicate shifts in perception and in thought more generally. An artist who writes or speaks against “what is felt to be the grain of the time” might well be initiating a new ‘structure of feeling’:

Established formations will criticize or reject him [*sic*], but to an increasing number of people he will seem to be speaking for them, for their own deepest sense of life, just because he was speaking for himself. A new structure of feeling is then becoming articulate. (11)

In other words, when the conventions and structures of plays seem inadequate to playwrights, actors and audiences because they are no longer able to articulate a particular set of experiences or a pervasive spirit (or ‘feeling’) of a time, the way out of artistic stagnation and cultural insignificance for drama is a paradigm shift in which new forms and new contents create a newly challenging theatre. This new theatre might be difficult and even offensive to some, but for an ever increasing audience it will be meaningful and expressive of their way of seeing the world.

Not every highly individualistic writer or artist does, however, initiate a new structure of feeling – for Williams the term is useful because “it directs our attention . . . to a kind of analysis which is at once concerned with particular forms and the elements of general forms” (11). Only if changes in form and content are, indeed, indicative of a greater trend, does the term ‘structure of

feeling' apply, although Williams does point out that there might be several such structures at work at any given time (13).

I would argue that the plays under discussion in this thesis, which were written between 1980 and 2002, show signs of such a shift in the 'structure of feeling' in Welsh drama in English. Furthermore, these plays, written after the great theatrical stasis of the 1970s (see Dedwydd Jones 39-48), respond to a much greater paradigm shift in Welsh self-perception and self-representation in post-1979 Wales. In the political realm, this paradigm shift meant that the decisive 'No'-vote for devolution in 1979 could turn into a (not quite as decisive) 'Yes'-vote when the devolution referendum was repeated in 1997.¹ A further (if rather fleeting) sign of a different cultural self-perception was the 'Cool Cymru' phenomenon in show-business and pop music: for some brief few years Welsh bands like Catatonia, the Stereophonics and the Manic Street Preachers found themselves catapulted to the top of the charts not despite but, to a degree, because of their Welshness. Welsh expatriates like John Cale and Shirley Bassey rediscovered a long-lost pride in Wales and actors like Catherine Zeta Jones found that a Swansea background did not limit but enhance her portfolio. One must not overemphasise these signs of a new self-confidence in Welshness. What they do show, however, is that in anglophone Wales Welsh identity and issues like self-confidence and self-perception have now entered public (and popular as opposed to academic) discourse to a hitherto unprecedented degree. Furthermore, the parameters for this discussion seem to have changed. The analysis of the 'Yes'-vote for devolution shows that questions of nation and of place are becoming increasingly important to the anglophone part of the population, whereas only two generations ago the discourse of the nation tended to be identified with *Y Fro Gymraeg*,² the Welsh-speaking part of the population. Identities based on place are coming to replace identities based on class in anglophone working-class communities, especially in South Wales. In his research on "Welsh Identity in a Former Mining Valley" that focused on the former mining villages Blaina and Nantyglo, Brian Roberts notes the shift in emphasis of a class-based identity to a place-based identity:

The strength of a 'feeling of Welshness' was a surprise in the research on the valley, given the traditional portrait of the south Wales Valleys as having dominant mining and class identities Writers have noted for some time that the

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- 1 Although the difference between 'Yes' and 'No' was a mere 6,721 votes, the swing towards the 'Yes'-vote was larger than in Scotland, where more people voted for devolution in both referenda (see Osmond 1999). Although the mood for more self-determination did not translate into an overwhelming majority, I would argue that the swing towards devolution is a sign of a greater change in self-perception than that experienced in Scotland.
 - 2 For a discussion of the term *Y Fro Gymraeg* and the Three-Wales-model, see Balsom. For a reinterpretation of the model after the devolution referendum in 1997, see Osmond 10-16.

social outlook of the Valleys has been shifting, even prior to the strike [in 1984/1985] and recent economic restructuring. Adamson argues that a 'new working class' is emerging which expresses a new Welsh identity separate from traditional political practices In our research, class was not used frequently as a reference point for identity. The 'full class conflict' view was usually expressed only by a number of retired miners, who, typically, had been active in the union. Much more often people spoke in terms of the valley and the Valleys in relation to the south Wales coastal belt and, especially, south-east England. (115-6)

The socio-economic change in the now de-industrialised centres in Wales of the last 20 years seems to have had a great influence on the self-perception of Roberts' respondents. Younger people no longer find traditional images of a class-based identity as attractive as their parents did and are less willing to analyse their world in terms of class. This is all too understandable given that the major industries, which supported such an identity, are all but gone in Wales. As a result, the referendum results show that in traditionally anglophone areas younger voters were much more likely to vote for devolution than older voters, who, apart from shared class-loyalties, still saw their main loyalty with the British state (Osmond 17). Furthermore, the language issue, which had bedevilled the 1979 referendum, ceased to be an issue of overwhelming importance, as questions of identity were now more likely to be connected to place rather than to language (see Alys Thomas, Osmond 7). Another point of reference for the slow shift in perceptions is the prodigious output of historical writing in the 1980s. While it is true that historical books about Wales have been written before and throughout the 20th century, there is a marked shift in the popularity and in the discourse of history in the 1980s. I discuss this shift in depth in chapter 3 – suffice to say here that a newly popular idiom in the work of Gwyn A. Williams and Dai Smith and the fact that these two historians became popular television presenters of historical programmes on Wales helped create a new interest in Welsh history and Welshness in a nation with very little indigenous media provision (see Osmond 4, Mackay and Powell).

From this evidence I would draw the following conclusions: firstly, public and popular discourse in Wales betrays a shift from preoccupations of class or language to one of place from the early 1980s onwards. Secondly, a shift from essentialist notions of identity to more inclusive, discursive constructions of identity is noticeable. These issues are far from clear-cut. However, I would argue that the very level of public discourse on identity and place is a sign for the hidden, tectonic changes in social 'structures of feeling', to apply Williams' term in another context, that took place and are taking place in Wales today. This shift must be seen within the context of an ever increasing frustration with

a home counties-dominated, Conservative politics ‘by remote control’³ in London, which addressed Welsh issues only inadequately, and with the lack of a meaningful voice in political and cultural discourses. I would further argue that the plays written and produced from 1980 onwards mirror these discussions and engage in similar debates. Furthermore, playwrights and theatre companies seem to find traditional theatrical conventions inadequate to express themselves and they start exploring new methods of writing and performing, new forms and conventions. This process is far from complete and the period under discussion is characterised by a proliferation of mixtures of old and new conventions. In this thesis, I attempt to sketch some developments in post-1980s Welsh drama in English but cannot hope to give an overview of all theatrical activity in the past 20 years. Thus, this study is in many senses a beginning of a process of analysing trends in contemporary text-based Welsh drama in English.

In order to situate contemporary Welsh drama in English within a wider context of Welsh drama, and in order to evaluate the shift in the ‘structure of feeling’, it is useful to look briefly at the beginning of drama and theatre in the English language in Wales. Although there was much dramatic activity before the 20th century (see Price, *The Professional Theatre*), the call for a National Theatre for Wales, which went hand in hand with the desire to establish an indigenous dramatic tradition, only came in the years immediately preceding the First World War. The writer and critic D.T. Davies writes that “[r]ound about 1913 . . . a totally different kind of Welsh play . . . made its appearance, different in theme, different in technique and very different in the authors’ attitude towards life” – and one of these plays was, of course, Davies’ own *Ble Ma Fa?* [*Where is he?*] which appeared in the same year (330). Moreover, as M. Wynn Thomas has argued, the new Welsh drama, especially the drama in English by authors like J.O. Francis, can be seen as initiating not only a new Welsh theatre but also a new literature, which later became known as Anglo-Welsh literature and then as Welsh writing in English (M. Wynn Thomas 1 *et passim*). I would argue that the timing of this small theatrical revolution, as well as the difference in ‘theme’, ‘technique’ and in ‘the authors’ attitude towards life’, set the scene for a Welsh drama in English that would remain relatively unchanged through to the 1970s. Only the theatre of the late 1970s and early 1980s would challenge the implicit assumptions about form, contents and audiences. These changes will be analysed in the course of this thesis.

According to Dedwydd Jones, author of the polemical *Black Book on the Welsh Theatre*, Welsh theatre begins with “the writers Caradoc Evans and

3 Posters of the ‘Yes’-campaign of the devolution referendum featured the slogan ‘Time to take over the remote control’ or ‘Amser ni reoli’r newid’. See Andrews, 96-7.