



CLWYD THEATR CYMRU

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG DOG

**A theatrical journey through the prose writings of
Dylan Thomas**

Created & Directed by Tim Baker

ACTORS' INSIGHTS

Q Did working in an ensemble piece create any problems? Do you enjoy working in this style of theatre?

Christian Patterson

Acting in an ensemble piece can cause problems, particularly during the initial “getting-to-know-you” period; however this production is different, as we all know each other extremely well. Another problem that can be caused by working in a small company is you might not find anyone to bond with, as opposed to a larger company where there is a likelihood that you will find someone who you do get along with. The easiness of this piece and the ease of performance in this piece come with the fact that we’ve all worked with Tim before and we all know each other. Four of us were trained at The Welsh College of Music and Drama and so we have the same habits in the rehearsal process.

Kai Owen

There haven’t been any problems for us as we are great friends. I’ve known Steve and Simon for about thirteen years, we were on the same National Youth Theatre course. When I was offered the part I said I would consider it, then five minutes later Simon rang, saying don’t think about it say yes, then half an hour later he rang back saying Steve was also in the company. Steve and Simon introduced us to Aled a few years ago and Christian is my best friend, I was the best man at his wedding, so we were all very excited about working together. As we are such good friends there is an amazing trust between us on stage; when I have to fall backwards I never question whether Steve will be there to catch me. We have great admiration for each other’s work too. I respect all three as actors and it’s great to be up here working together.

Steve Meo

Playing in an ensemble piece and having a short rehearsal period, as we did with Portrait, can cause difficulties, but this time there weren’t any, as we all know each other so well. This is the first production I’ve done where I’ve really felt the sense of the ensemble; at any point during a performance I can cast my glance round any cast member and feel their support, it’s a lovely feeling.

Aled Pugh

I have enjoyed it immensely because we know each other personally as well as professionally and we’ve all worked with Tim before, so this meant that we could get on with rehearsals straight away. Ensemble work does pose a few problems - you are totally dependant on each other and need to trust everyone implicitly, but there is a plus side - you can pick up on each other’s energies; also you’re not spending time back stage waiting in the wings and coming on cold. Also it’s great being part of a team. Obviously individuality takes a back seat as you’re working together to form a collective piece so it is different. Normally you’re working on one character and so are not always in rehearsals, this means that you don’t know the other characters as well or the piece as a whole. In ensemble work everyone is always in rehearsals so you are always looking at the piece as a whole. I love it immensely.

Simon Nehan

I don't think it presents any problems; it's lovely to work in a piece that is so evenly split between five actors. It means you are more involved instead of watching people reciting chunks of speeches. I think there is more support when the work is evenly spread.

Q How difficult is changing characters so often?

Christian Patterson

Playing a number of characters is easier in this piece than many others, because the characters are very specific with Dylan Thomas. You normally get an introduction to a character before you see them, so he's giving you what he wants e.g. The Uncle in "The Outing" is described as: "he was so big and trumpeting and red-hairy and used to fill every inch of the hot little house like an old buffalo squeezed into an airing cupboard." So you know exactly what you are doing and where you are going. *Under Milk Wood* is more difficult as the characters return later in the piece so you have to remember exactly how you played them. One of my problems in "Portrait" is because I'm working with four funny people I'm forever laughing and if I'm not careful I can lose concentration, but when an introduction begins I know which section comes next.

Kai Owen

It's not too bad. During rehearsals you explore different ways of doing the characters, trying new ideas until suddenly one feels right and it's there. It's just practice really. As the text is so good you can be as big as you like or as small, it's a joy to do. When I'm on stage I do think before I change character, just for a moment, but really it's done subconsciously.

Steve Meo

It is quite a challenge, but everything gets bedded in during the rehearsal period and as long as we concentrate and are committed during performances it does come easily. This is because Dylan Thomas writes his characters so well, the pace and style of language is different for each one. He gives you the springboard to develop the characters.

Aled Pugh

It's not that difficult because a lot of these characters are stereotyped – they're bold and brash. It's just fun to do them. Usually in a theatre play you are one character, I think playing many different ones is great fun, you can let your hair down, it's a different experience.

Simon Nehan

Because you are given great descriptions of the characters you aren't starting from scratch like "round friendly owlsh woman". So instantly you have an image of that woman. Dylan Thomas gives you so much in his text as a starting point, and then you pick up other bits in rehearsals.

Q Do you think it works with everyone playing Dylan as opposed to one narrator?

Christian Patterson

Having performed it as the whole company playing Dylan at various times, I can't imagine it working any other way. My wife, Michelle, realised in the first speech that we are all playing Dylan. I think it works this way; we go from when he was a child to when he returns to Swansea enquiring about himself. It also means that we all have a chance to be Dylan and say his words such as "eggs laid by tigers" and this gives the piece a through line. If only one actor was to be him, I would have wanted it to be me because I'm a Dylan fanatic. The "dead, dead, dead" section always reminds me of the last scene in *The Sixth Sense*; he has relived all his memories, in a similar way to one's last few seconds alive. I think that Tim has created this as a classic ghost story.

Kai Owen

Having one Dylan could be great, but there's something about this way of presenting it, as a true ensemble piece, that gives all of us equal ownership. I think it works really well. We haven't gone for the obvious, like us all wearing a hat when we're Dylan – I don't like things like that. It would be very interesting to see a production with one Dylan and five actors playing the characters, more like *Under Milk Wood*. We thought about this in rehearsals but we enjoy it this way and were happy with it. Obviously another director and company might have approached it in a different way.

Steve Meo

All of us playing Dylan contributes to the ensemble style, we pick up on each other's energies. Each of us puts our own style on the way we speak as Dylan, which I think is really good and makes it an interesting piece.

Aled Pugh

As it is an ensemble piece, my initial thought was that we'd have to share Dylan's lines. I didn't think it would be cast as someone playing Dylan Thomas. It's better this way, it means that we are all part of the same thing, we all get to play Dylan and we all get to look in and watch Dylan as well. We're not trying to be Dylan, or to look like him, all we're trying to express are his words and the feeling of them and each of us gives our own interpretation of that. The feedback is positive, so it does work.

Simon Nehan

It saves one of us rattling on for hours. I like Dylan's lines being split up, because I like the way it is broken up; it's like the five different stages of Dylan's life. And the way Tim has directed it with each of us playing Dylan in silhouette at the back of the stage works very well too. Also it means we haven't got too much to learn! It's great that there's another of Dylan Thomas' work out there, normally it's just *Under Milk Wood* that people can see.

Q Which scenes have been the most challenging?

Christian Patterson

I think for me it would be *The Followers* or *Who Do You Wish Was Here*. *The Followers* because I am narrating against some exceptional character work and I have to keep my end up. The last story because it is very emotional, it goes from being very happy to darker thoughts. So on the whole the second half is most challenging.

Kai Owen

I would definitely say the most enjoyable is *The Outing* because of all the different characters. *Peaches* is quite challenging with my longest speeches and I'm playing him as a little boy. It's a lovely story; it's always nice playing a child. *The Followers* is challenging because playing an eighteen year old is difficult sometimes. In rehearsals it was my least favourite, now it's my favourite. I thought it was a strange story; I couldn't make sense of it for a while, but now I think it's clever. I'm just narrating in the last story, so I can watch the amazing acting. So the first story is a great opening, a good warm-up, it gets the blood going, the second one focuses on the child. The third is atmospheric, a grey depressed dark night, which was difficult to capture in rehearsals but easier on stage with the lights etc., and the last story for me is just great to watch.

Steve Meo

That's difficult to answer, as there is so much contrast between them. *The Outing* is high energy, almost cartoon-like in the way it shifts around and the descriptions and the words are very outlandish, so that it poses its own challenges in terms of timing and choreography. *Who Do You Wish Was Here?* has a dramatic change of pace which brings its own problems. But I guess for me *The Outing* is the most challenging; there are so many words in it.

Aled Pugh

They are all challenging in their own way – *The Outing* with its high energy and lots of short lines, flies by giving you no time to think. *Peaches* is my most challenging story, as I play Gwilym with a massive speech as a minister. In terms of performing, the last two stories are challenging because I play women, but that's a physical thing, there's no text for me at all.

Simon Nehan

It's all challenging, but in different ways. *The Outing* is very physical and big, so that can be tiring. In *Peaches* I play a woman, sometimes there's a tendency to be a "dame" so I try to give it a touch of reality. I mostly narrate in the third one so getting the words out properly is difficult. In the fourth story I play Dylan, this is quite challenging, as it is more sentimental with little humour.

Q Has the speaking of text been a challenge?

Christian Patterson

Dylan Thomas was the most prolific Welsh writer of any generation; he was a Swansea man, like myself. Maybe because of that he had a massive influence on my life. I think he wrote the most beautiful language. The fear I have with *Portrait* is that I want to do the piece justice. I've got his recording of *The Outing* and *The Return Journey* and we're not doing it in the same way as he did, but that was of a different time, more booming and singy. I think this cast adheres to a lot of rules for verse speaking. We all have such respect for the written word, not for one second does it go anywhere else. It's all about words, as the piece itself says so many times "words, words, words". If you paid attention to the scenario and not the words, you'd be in a sinking ship. Tim is a fantastic creator of words and has made the piece accessible to any age range at all. As a director he's a real taskmaster about words so we couldn't get away with an inch, but it just so happened none of us wanted to get away with an inch. So I think we've created something special, and not only the piece on stage, but the relationships throughout the company. It is incredibly unique.

Kai Owen

Yes, definitely the biggest challenge and the best one, it's so enjoyable to do. It is vocally taxing; there are some difficult sentence structures and wonderfully unusual phrases like "eggs like tigers". I don't have problems learning lines, I usually pick them up through rehearsals; but with this piece I had to sit down each evening to learn them. Even now I go through my speeches in the shower before each performance even though I know them really well. The words are fantastic, just difficult to learn, but when you have they flow brilliantly. We all wanted to learn it quickly; if I'd had my casting before rehearsals I would have learnt it then. It's much more beneficial to be off the book as soon as possible. You can't break the back of Thomas until you're off the book. The text is the most important thing, the staging is easy, it's not complex being so minimalistic. We do vocal warm-ups before each performance to make sure our diction is clear and we can get our mouths round the words. It's a brilliant piece to do. I think that it's the best production I've been a part of at Clwyd Theatr Cymru for a long time, I've loved everything and I'm very proud of what we've created.

Steve Meo

Dylan uses words that you wouldn't normally hear or use together, lots of onomatopoeia and the sentence structure is difficult to learn. But now I know my lines I know I'll find them difficult to get rid of. I find myself seeing someone in a street and it will remind me of a line and I just say it. I did *Under Milk Wood* up here and for months and months I couldn't get the lines out of my head. This does happen with other text but more so with Dylan Thomas, his descriptions are so complete e.g.

“peeling yellow walls” you can see it, you can smell it. It’s all in the imagery. I think Thomas’ work is fantastic, and he deserves all the credit we can give him.

Aled Pugh

When you do Shakespeare people think it’s not easy, because the language is not our everyday language. On the other hand when you are in any play, it’s not your own words, they belong to your character. And because they belong to your character, it doesn’t really make any difference how the piece is written or which words are used; you still have to adopt somebody else’s way of thinking. I think people create a sort of barricade with Shakespeare or Thomas, and that automatically makes it more difficult. I admit I do that as well, but as soon as you interpret it, it does become clearer. It’s just language, a way of communicating. There is the challenge of making sure we do communicate effectively and the audience are not bombarded with tricky words so they can listen and understand the stories. It’s very wordy and poetic and we need to express the words as a conversation.

Simon Nehan

Of course it’s demanding, but the words are beautiful and enjoyable to say. You see the audience listen to every word. It’s also demanding all being on stage all the time, but we do listen to each other so much so that you think “oh that’s a long pause” but then realise there is a pause because it’s your line. This happened loads of time in rehearsals, as we loved listening to the words.

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