

NTQ Reports and Announcements

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John Russell Brown

Remembering Glynne Wickham

Celebrating the life of Glynne Wickham, 1922–2004.

STUDENTS of theatre, scholars, critics, and a good number of theatre professionals throughout Britain have cause to be grateful for the lifetime's work of Glynne Wickham. Appointed in 1945 as Assistant Lecturer at Bristol University and in 1955 as Senior Lecturer and Head of Department, in 1960 he became the country's first Professor of Drama. During that time he had recruited George Rowell, John Lavender, and George Brandt to join him and had successfully negotiated many of the numerous obstacles, both intellectual and administrative, that were then obstructing the academic study of drama or theatre. As a consequence of his pioneering, the road became clearer and simpler for those who were to follow in other universities.

In many ways the department that Glynne Wickham founded was to remain well ahead of achievements elsewhere. There is still no rival of its Theatre Collection, an archive that now has the status of a national museum. In the encouragement of new writing, few if any departments can emulate the first performances in its Studio of the first plays of Harold Pinter (then a professional actor) and Tom Stoppard (then a journalist in Bristol), or the fellowship awarded to John Arden (then at the start of his career), or the study of radio, film, and television inaugurated under the leadership of George Brandt. 'New theatre' was everywhere apparent: and it was the name given to a journal started in 1960 within the Drama Department at Bristol. At the same time Donald Watson of the French Department was translating the plays of Ionesco soon after their Paris premieres. All this happened during Glynne Wickham's early years and heads of departments elsewhere are still left wondering how it was achieved.

Benefits were felt across Britain, not only because Bristol's example encouraged other universities to found their own departments, but also in directly useful ways. Junior lecturers and graduate students found posts elsewhere, bringing with them the experience of teaching the new subject. The Master's programme attracted student directors from newer departments that were unable to offer similar opportunities. Glynne Wickham himself often served as External Examiner or External

Assessor on Appointment Boards for other universities and, as I know well, was always ready on the telephone to give helpful and encouraging advice or, when he thought necessary, sober and articulate admonishment.

The strong lead given at Bristol also had the advantage of enabling other departments to define themselves as extensions or amendments to the pattern it had set. This was especially true with regard to the academic status of practical work. From the start this was strongly encouraged at Bristol, Glynne Wickham himself giving the lead, but performance was not integrated within the regular teaching and assessment processes. Undergraduates could become involved with a great number of extra-curricular productions in which they enjoyed almost absolute freedom to follow their own instincts, take risks, and make mistakes. It was a dispensation that worked well, especially for the ablest students who could manage the pressures on their time and energies, but in other universities matters were to be managed differently.

At Bristol the academic study of drama was not at all narrow, but included theatre history, as exemplified in the courses taught by Glynne Wickham and in his own research that specialized in aspects of staging and production. The emphasis on drama and theatre history provided a strong core that could be understood and approved by colleagues in the Arts Faculty and greatly enhanced the Department's standing in the university and beyond. Besides those advantages gained by omitting acting and performance from the Bristol syllabus, other departments that would be founded later in other academic contexts were given the opportunity to make their own marks with teaching and research in these more practical directions. They would be called Departments of Theatre, of Theatre Studies, or of Drama and Theatre Arts, not of Drama, because by then that description could be taken to refer only to dramatic literature. In the last few decades, courses in acting, performance, or performance studies have become widely available.

Glynne Wickham's more personal achievements were as extraordinary as those of the pioneering department he founded and guided for many years. As an undergraduate at Oxford before he left to join the RAF he acted Hamlet, and on his return he became the first post-war President of OUDS; he then started research into medieval drama for a D Phil degree. (Some years later Glynne's Hamlet was the reason my tutor gave for encouraging me to act and direct while studying for a degree in English Literature; he spoke of his performance as if it had happened yesterday.)

While Head of Department Glynne Wickham continued his practical theatre work – he directed the North American premiere of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* at Actors Workshop in San Francisco in 1960 – and while shouldering a heavy load of academic administration (he took his turn as Dean of the Arts Faculty), Glynne Wickham's publications appeared with scarcely a break until the fifth and final volume of *Early English Stages* in 2002: its first volume of 1959 was a substantial basis for his worldwide reputation for erudite and original scholarship. Among his other books were *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage* (1969), *English Moral Interludes* (1975), and *A History of the Theatre* (1985). He was also one of the General Editors of the eight-volume *Theatre in Europe: a Documentary History* for Cambridge University Press, himself editing and contributing to *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (2001).

Time was found for active membership and often the chairmanship of numerous committees, editorial boards, and trusts, together with work

as a consultant, adviser, or visiting professor at universities in Britain, North America, and Africa. His practical interests and experience led to long service on the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Trust and advisory work for Sam Wanamaker's rebuilding of the Globe Theatre on Bankside in London. Under his Presidency, the Society for Theatre Research became a source of research funding for theatre practitioners and local historians as well as senior graduate students and faculty of universities in Britain and abroad. In 2002 the Society joined with the Bristol Department in founding an annual Wickham Lecture to be given alternately by a scholar and a theatre professional.

Glynne Wickham's personal qualities and the enduring value of his books, the work of students after leaving Bristol, his service to theatre in many forms and organizations, and, by no means least, the continuing strength of the Department he founded have set standards that have inspired and supported many others. They will be long remembered and call for grateful celebration.

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Helen Freshwater

Political Futures

Report on the 'Political Futures: Alternative Theatre in Britain Today' conference at the University of Reading, 16–18 April 2004.

THE LIVELY DEBATE that preceded this conference on the Standing Committee of University Drama Departments (SCUDD) e-mail discussion list over the value and focus of such an event raised provocative questions. And perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that this conference generated dispute long before it even started. After all, its title signalled engagement with the present, and, most importantly, *the future* of theatre, in contrast to the average conference's orientation towards the past. Instead of sticking to analysis of past events, it proposed an assessment of practice in the here and now, and, perhaps more significantly, it directed us to face into the future: to consider what is yet to come.

Rather than being governed by the archival logic of retrospection and reassessment, the unapologetic primacy of the political in the conference's title anticipated participants who shared an interest in political intervention, or at least a desire to evaluate contemporary work in order to identify those forms that are worth pursuing in the future, and those which are not. If the average academic conferencegoer is satisfied with inter-

preting the world in various ways, one might well expect that attending a conference with a title like this would indicate an investment in changing it.

The conference was opened with a thought-provoking keynote from Baz Kershaw which set out to address both the problematic definition of 'alternative' theatre and our perception of what counts as political. Kershaw began by asking how we square the statement, contained in the conference's call for papers, that alternative theatre 'has never seemed healthier or more vital to the cultural map' with the numerous assertions made between 1990 and 1999 that alternative theatre was in crisis. His paper pursued this question through reference to the destabilization of political categories post-1989; contemplation of the 'real/unreal' threats of global warming and terrorism; and analysis of the conceptual binarism that divides performance between the live, the embodied, and the site-specific, on the one hand, and the virtual, the immaterial, and the mediated, on the other. Kershaw concluded with an introduction to 'ecologies of performance': a field of research that he is currently exploring – or, more accurately, constructing. He proposed that we might approach an evaluation of the health of political performance through an ecological model intended to measure the impact and influence that performance has upon its surrounding environment, and its diversity.

Encouragingly, the range of performance practice discussed and demonstrated during the rest of the conference bore witness to this diversity, as did the constitution of the group it attracted. In his welcome address, organizer John Bull observed that he could see many familiar faces in his

audience but also, pleasingly, plenty of unfamiliar ones. What's more, the conference was successful in attracting a mix of academics and practitioners – the latter including Max Stafford-Clark of Out of Joint Theatre Company, Kwong Loke of Yellow Earth Theatre, and Paul Davies from Volcano Theatre Company. Indeed, the playwright John Clifford kicked off the conference's collection of parallel panels with a lively paper that explicitly rejected theoretical analysis in favour of a description of pragmatic strategies for evading institutional censorship – defined in strongly inclusive terms. Moreover, there were opportunities to attend a workshop exploring biodynamic psychology led by Yvon Bonenfant, and a workshop by Mojisola Adebayo which drew upon her experience of performing, writing, and directing in numerous countries including Brazil, India, Israel, Palestine, and South Africa.

The conference's combination of practice and analysis was perhaps best represented by Liz Tomlin and Mary Oliver. Oliver delivered an impressive performative exploration of her work *Mother Tongue*, demonstrating how digital technology can be productively manipulated to expand our notion of liveness, whilst Tomlin first gave a paper which interrogated the radicalism of contemporary approaches to narrative, then went on to perform in *Nothing to Declare*, a production by Point Blank Theatre Company.

Tomlin's interest in the evaluation of the political efficacy of aesthetic strategies was evident in many of the other papers. Chris Megson weighed up the strengths and limitations of the Tricycle Theatre's series of documentary 'tribunal' productions, whilst Graham Saunders and Peter Billingham gave papers which encouraged the reassessment of Edward Bond's work. Lib Taylor examined the potentially disruptive force of spectacle in a panel which included an exploration of Desperate Optimists' *Play-Boy* from Nadine Holdsworth, and a reading of the work of Forced Entertainment in relation to the Balkan conflicts of the early 1990s by Geoff Willcocks. Elsewhere, Alison Oddey's presentation discussed the identity of the spectator-performer through an analysis of Graeme Miller's *Linked*, while papers from Aoife Monks and Daniel Bye examined the effect of the introduction of aesthetic experimentation into those most mainstream of venues, the National Theatre and Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum.

If nothing else, the diversity of the conference was evident in the contrast between the focus of these two analyses and the kind of work outlined by Bill McDonnell and Sarah Thornton. McDonnell offered an inspirational description of his involvement in numerous community theatre projects between 1980 and 2000, while Thornton explained the scope of the *Living Place* project. In my opinion, Thornton's presentation best ful-

filled the conference's remit to consider political futures. Indeed, the ambitious and exciting project that she described will still be in development as this *NTQ* reaches the shelves. Her company is working in partnership with twelve groups and organizations in order to explore the impact of changing housing provision in Liverpool through research, development of a TIE show, delivery of community-based workshops, and small-scale performances. The project will culminate in June 2005 with a large-scale site-specific performance in and on a Liverpool tower block.

Feminist theatre and the representation of women's experience were also well represented at the conference. Elizabeth Hare gave an account of her own practice; Carina Bartlett discussed the representation of violence in Sarah Daniels's plays; Lynette Goddard problematized the politicization of black British women's theatre; and Frances Piper explored the theatrical construction of the mother in Howard Barker's *Wounds to the Face*. The conference also touched upon 'comparative alternatives' through examples of practice from Europe, North America, and Canada. Sara Jane Bailes approached the subject from an autobiographical angle, foregrounding the contrast between her knowledge of the downtown Manhattan performance scene and her recent re-acquaintance with British theatre in order to highlight the contingencies of cultural context, whilst Daniel Mufson outlined his pragmatic response to a similar relocation: the construction of a portable project, the website alternativetheater.com.

Lawrence Bogad gave an entertaining account of his involvement in performative protest events in both the UK and the US, providing an insight into the strategies which structure this 'repertoire of contention', and the differing constraints which accompany these efforts to reclaim privatized public space for protest and social commentary. Alan Filewod and David Watt gave a joint paper describing the history – and collaboration – of British-based Banner Theatre and Ground Zero Productions from Canada, whose approaches to performative political intervention are grounded in many years' experience of working with the professional theatre industry.

Opportunities for comparison were also afforded by a panel of three papers from Heike Roms, Tom McGuire, and David Pattie, which focused upon performance and theatre from Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland respectively. Heike Roms discussed the format of Pearson/Brookes's 2001 piece, *Polis*, which gave its audience control over the construction of the performance and its representation. Her analysis was framed by a discussion of the possible relationship between theatrical and political participation, which suggested that *Polis* proffered an alternative to the current preoccupation with the establishment of a Welsh National Theatre: an

alternative which foregrounds civic rather than national definitions of Welshness. Tom Maguire examined the complexities of the 'propaganda war' that shadows the staged representation of the Troubles in Northern Ireland; and David Pattie focused on the work of Gregory Burke and David Greig, among others, in his account of how both the style and content of recent Scottish theatre reflects the country's movement towards social and political independence.

These issues were given a different slant in Dan Rebellato's stylish – and highly provocative – paper. Rebellato concluded his interrogation of 'The Decline and Fall of the State of the Nation Play' with a controversial call to reassess the value of playwriting in comparison to site-specific performance. He claimed that a play's ability to represent multiple locations, and its inherent reference to productions in other places and at other times, might be considered to have greater political agency than site-specific work – work which, in its preoccupation with particularity of place, cannot provide adequate engagement with the power of global capital.

The conference concluded with contributions from Aleks Sierz and Max Stafford-Clark, followed by an address from David Edgar. Sierz and Stafford-Clark's offerings were both curiously downbeat. Max Stafford-Clark was cautious about

the theatre's potential to effect political change. Instead, he proposed a more modest goal for practitioners: the effective articulation of experience which is recognized by its audience. Sierz described his nostalgia for the political and emotional certainties of the past via his response to the recent production of Edgar's *Daughters of the Revolution* at the Barbican, blaming the pressures of commercialization for a decline in fringe theatre. Interestingly, the response to these analyses suggested that the majority of the conference didn't share their views. In particular, Mojisola Adebayo's powerful repudiation of Sierz's analysis – in which she suggested that he was simply looking in the wrong place for radical, or oppositional, performance – was supported by a strong round of applause.

To my mind, it seemed as though those attending the conference were more in tune with the sentiments expressed in the final paper of the conference, David Edgar's 'That Was Then, and This is Now'. Whilst refusing to romanticize the past, and acknowledging the shortcomings and limitations of some contemporary theatre practice, Edgar admitted that his motivation for attending conferences such as these was the desire for news of valuable new work. It seemed to me that most participants, like Edgar, had their eyes firmly fixed on the future.

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Ian Herbert

Golden Masks in Moscow

The Russian theatre recognizes achievement at the Golden Mask ceremony in the Bolshoi, April 2004.

Russia's Golden Mask awards are presented in a glitzy ceremony in the Bolshoi Theatre – like the Oliviers with class, except that the Moscow public gets the chance to make its own mind up about the nominees, whose shows are performed over a six-week period in the city's theatres before the final jury decisions are made.

Overseas visitors get a condensed look at some of the Golden Mask's highlights in a special showcase weekend. Two years ago the Russian Case held special interest as a platform for new writing, although what it actually demonstrated was how little of it is reaching the stages of a country which can boast nearly four hundred state-subsidized theatres and a metropolitan theatre scene comparable to that of London or Paris. This year's choice,

by Marina Davydova of *Izvestia*, was broader in scope, but new work from young writers was still thin on the ground.

The Russian Case featured two pieces by the whimsical Yevgeny Grishkoviets, writing for others now but still unable to escape from what are beginning to seem his private obsessions. But Moscow has yet to see the new Sigarev, *Ladybird* (though I guess it can stand the wait), while the Presnyakovs' latest, *Captive Spirits*, is a rather sophomoric study of the three-way marriage of the symbolist playwright Alexander Blok. A subject which might have been expected to evoke thoughts of passion and poetry conveyed neither to this non-Russian-speaker; instead, the local audience laughed long and loud. The same authors' more substantial *Terrorism* was up for a Mask, but it was the Blok bio-revue, directed by the up-and-coming Vladimir Ageev, which won an award as the Spectators' Favourite. The Mask for most innovative production went to Ivan Vyrypayev's *Oxygen*, a two-hander with 'pornojazz' soundtrack from an on-stage DJ, due to tour to Vienna, as were the Presnyakovs.

Another example of new writing, for the Moscow audience at any rate, was the Russian premiere of Vladimir Sorokin's *Honeymoon*, originally produced some years ago in a typical blood-and-sperm staging by Germany's Frank Castorf,

but seen here very differently in an elegant directing debut from the Golden Mask's producer, Eduard Boyakov (with Ilze Rudzite). Sorokin's bizarre love story of the relationship between the masochistic son of an SS man and the feisty Jewish daughter of a KGB official was milked here for its holocaust associations, with superimposed film of the camps rather than the gulags, just as Kama Ginkas's students' production on the life of Marc Chagall, *Dreams of Exile*, harped on the Nazi persecution which Chagall largely observed from New York, rather than the Soviet horrors he watched more closely as a commissar.

At a lively meeting with their overseas counterparts, the Moscow critics, all of whom have PhDs in Theatrolgy, were scathing about the unqualified status of London and New York critics, but worried about their own closeness to the local theatre community – it's commonplace for critics to share a drink with the director and his team after a first night. This may explain why Boyakov's directing debut was coldly received, and Ginkas's sprawling effort highly praised: the former was perceived as doing something for which he wasn't qualified, the latter was known to have direct family experience of Nazi persecution, of which he was speaking on stage for the first time.

Critics and directors alike are having to come to terms with a very ambivalent world. On the grand scale, the country had just elected (by a huge majority) a KGB-trained President, whose style of government has been compared kindly to that of the Tsars, less kindly to that of his former bosses. Although he has recently raised civil servants' salaries, I was assured by theatre friends that no Russian who owns a new car or is putting their kids through college can be doing so on money that has been honestly earned.

In theatre, the new situation is breeding a growing commercialism – *Witches of Eastwick* is a fairly hot ticket (though no Golden Mask was awarded in the musicals category), the Moscow Art has a Ray Cooney in its repertoire, and some successful directors are being criticized for their crowd-pleasing approach; but there is also a remarkable resilience in the more serious sector: enterprising director Valery Fokin (winner of this year's Mask for best large-scale production, for a *Government Inspector* he directed for the Maryinsky in St Petersburg) has tapped private money to establish a well-equipped modern theatre on the top floor of a Moscow commercial building, the Meyerhold Centre, while the city's Mayor has given the guru-like Anatoly Vassiliev a fantastic \$27 million theatre-cum-temple where he performs his sacred research and occasional theatre

without a care for the bottom line. How long this can last is open to question: the most likely future for Vassiliev's centre, if he should lose favour, would be as an upmarket nightclub – few other theatre directors would want to battle against the esoterically defined sightlines of its playing spaces.

Russian theatre remains above all a director's theatre – no fewer than fifteen directors being Mask nominees in their category. Distinguished foreign visitors to the festival were Eimuntas Nekrosius with a five-hour *Cherry Orchard* and Declan Donnellan with an all-male *Twelfth Night*, both using crack local casts, both clearly for export. Nekrosius got a special prize from the critics, while Donnellan (whose production seemed to me to rehash well-worn Cheek By Jowl tricks) was rapturously received by the audience. A better demonstration for me of the supremacy of Russian actors (recognized also by the jury with a special award) came from Sergei Zhenovach's Moscow Maly production of Ostrovsky's comedy, *Truth Is Good But Happiness Is Better*, in what appeared to be a very traditional reading but was, I was told, actually quite ground-breaking.

Slightly shakier in performance, but fascinating in concept, was *Nora*, Mikhail Bychkov's silent-movie (and therefore, one could say, in-period) treatment of *A Doll's House* for St Petersburg's White Theatre, which was considerably more convincing than Thomas Ostermeier's recent Yuppie shoot-out. It highlighted Krogstad as an eye-rolling melodrama villain (with Rank more of a cheery old soul), which created interesting new perspectives. A similar result was achieved by Lev Dodin's foregrounding of the Professor and Yelena in his austere *Uncle Vanya* for St Petersburg's Maly, a most rewarding return to actor-led production after some of his recent design-heavy efforts. Dodin deservedly won the best director award, with his rather weak Vanya more surprisingly named best actor.

But the real news from the Golden Mask is that the political and social situation that I have mentioned has led Russian theatre back to what it does best, talking in code. A fascinating example was the talented young Dmitri Chernyakov's staging of *The Double Inconstancy* for an equally young company from Novosibirsk, in which Marivaux's aristocratic social manipulators become video-wielding men in suits. A literally smashing conclusion to the play, which we had seen through a plate glass screen, suggests that it is cocking a snook at television reality shows like *Big Brother*, but Orwell's original is never far from our minds. It won the Mask for best small show, and its superbly vital leading actress, Olga Tsink, picked up another special award from the jury.