

Ruth Little has paid a number of visits to Ireland over the past few years, where she has been transforming the thinking of participants of *The Next Stage* - Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival and Theatre Forum's programme for professional artists to develop through seeing shows and engaging with visiting practitioners through workshops and talks. Síle Ní

Bhroin, Associate Director of Graffiti Theatre Company and one of the 'transformed', caught up with Ruth in London earlier this year. Here is a snippet of their conversation. Full text is available on www.nayd.ie.

CHANGE OR DIE

- AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO DRAMATURGY

SNB: With regard to text in theatre or the word as opposed to the greater phenomenon, how important is text for you?

RL: I came into theatre through literature, so my original response and engagement was with the word itself, and the relationship between meaning and metaphor; the games, the echoes that you can play with language. It was the sort of mental processes involved in writing that I found fascinating, but I actually quite quickly got shot with that literary approach. I think it's been a problem for British theatre in particular, because it is so text based, and yet text has been seen as separate from the process of making theatre in three or if you like, four dimensions (if you add time to that as well). So, in the last ten years, my interest has really shifted in the sense that for me, language in theatre is another form of gesture. I think this is the fundamental truth that I want to convey to [young writers] and give them the confidence to explore for themselves. Over the years, there has been a tendency to let the writer be a separate entity - a kind of wayward, awkward, difficult outsider, all of which is fine in cultural terms, but in the practice - and in the community practice of making theatre - it's not enough.

So, the reason why I work as a dramaturg in dance now, as well as in theatre is because the level of human communication is no different between them. We speak in order to bring about change, not to deliver information. And young people know that, because they understand social hierarchies. They understand the complexities of our social relationships and therefore the gestures and the status signals that we give when we speak, as well as when we move. So, in a way, I think they're absolutely primed and ready to understand precisely what language is and does in theatre.

SNB: Do you find that older writers are generally more resistant?

RL: Sometimes. But, it's funny how it expresses itself and emerges on the whole, as a wariness about dramaturgy itself. Dramaturgy is a role, or a relationship, and that's all that it is. It's not a career in a sense, because it only comes into being in partnership. You can't go through life as a dramaturg - you can only be a dramaturg in certain contexts, but I think that some of those older writers have got the wrong end of the stick, sometimes because they have been beaten with that stick! I think it's true

that younger writers are more willing and more curious about the kinds of engagement that you can have with a dramaturg, because they know that you've hung around, that you know a lot of writers, that you've got inside you, bits of conversation and experience that they're hungry for, and so I don't think they instinctively are feeling wariness about entering into a strong, and interesting and challenging connection.

SNB: Well, as you say, if it's an enabling or empowering connection, who would be against that?

RL: And of course it must be that. But the other role that I think is really important and can be played by the dramaturg, is to open up the kinds of languages that young writers feel entitled to use in exploring their world and other worlds on the stage. There's a thing that Ludwig Wittgenstein said and I think is really important: "the limits of my language are the limits of my life." And I think, with young people, with young writers, it's really important to give them two things... one – a sense of entitlement to go where they want to go; and secondly – a sense of responsibility to speak of things that matter, and unless you've got both of those things together, I think you can end up in a slightly chaotic environment, where nobody knows quite what they're doing and they're just trying things out.

SNB: The words that you used there: a sense of entitlement and a sense of responsibility ...I think that a lot of young people in Ireland in the current economic and political meltdown, feel neither or are searching for both. They grew up during one situation and are now presented with an entirely different reality to which they must react, as people and as artists.

RL: But it is the perpetual search, isn't it? But theatre can be a fantastic channelling for the intensity of that experience of feeling disempowered, and if we don't recognise the value of that in theatre then we've got nothing growing underneath the upper level of material that's being produced and reproduced. It's a difficult balance, but it's an important balance. There's always a kind of generational tension in theatre – between writers who dislike or are wary of or are unhappy about the kinds of interdisciplinary, cross art-form experiments that are generally being undertaken by younger theatre makers. I know that in Ireland, there's a lot of that sort of work, isn't there?

SNB: And a lot of it has come from a youth theatre context... people who came through youth theatre and then became artists who are working very much on the edge of the traditions in a very interesting way.

RL: That's absolutely been my experience with *The Next Stage* – there's always been a really solid body of practitioners there, who've come up – often outside of bigger cities, who have really pioneered their own way into theatre, and have pretty much defined it for themselves, I think. But it seems that there's an insecurity that has set in as well. Some of those practitioners feel that they are on the

margins, and that they're thought to be on the margins.

SNB: And what's your opinion in terms of a more formalised training through a third level institution?

RL: It depends on the institution. Until fairly recently I've felt that the institutions and drama schools were a bit remote from the practitioners who are actually making the work and putting it out there.

I think we need to open up and make more porous, the boundaries between the institutions, the drama schools and professional theatre... and I think one of the responsibilities that professional theatre practitioners have is to keep an eye on what is happening in the drama schools.

I was thinking this morning about what makes a really good and healthy theatre culture. You get this slightly prescriptive approach, particularly from government and through the Arts Council that you have to provide excellence. That your public funding has to support excellence, but that's an insane requirement, because excellence will always be a tiny percentage. And what you need in order for that excellence to come up is a really diverse, really big, really blousy, complex culture that's just full of contradictions, and every now and again something will just burst into being. It's really important to try things out. It really is – to try them and to fail. It doesn't really matter what you do with your public funding or anything like that – if you can't make mistakes, you just won't grow.

SNB: What about the relationships between theatre and climate; theatre and the weather systems that you also spoke to us about during *The Next Stage*?

RL: For me, everything I do, should be about the universe really, should be about what it is to be alive in the world. So, my requirement of theatre is that it expresses everything, and it doesn't artificially separate itself from the processes of life, and the experiences that we have in travelling through our lives. So, even though a theatre piece traditionally takes place in a separated space, it isn't separate from its context, and its context is present in its audience, and its audience is connected to the world beyond it and the world beyond it is perpetually penetrating the membrane around a play. The point about a membrane is that it's porous, and it allows for exchange in two directions – and any theatre practice that doesn't allow for exchange in two directions is dead. So I think it's really interesting to think about the idea of a play in the same way that you think about any concentrated living system. And to me the most interesting and perhaps the most relevant living system of which we are a part is the weather, and the structures of weather processes and weather patterns are really just the structures of life. Plays have high or low pressure systems. It's all about energy. So, talking about weather is a very effective way of visualising what happens to energy. When a weather system develops towards a storm, very precise and particular things happen. Or what if you explore the relationship between those precise and particular things

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in the world and in a play, which is a system that is moving towards the edge of chaos? So, I started looking at weather and storms in plays, because I wanted to see what playwrights do with them, literally, and what you find, very quickly is that – first of all, plays are absolutely full of them. Playwrights have what Martin Kemp, the art historian, has called structural intuition. They recognise themes, processes without necessarily having names for them, so I think, because they work in this concentrated, intense medium, they recognise that plays are stormy... that they contain the possibilities of a storm, and so they use them. They're everywhere – if you start plucking play texts from the shelves, you'll just find them over and over and over again.

If you look at weather in plays, it gives you an opportunity to talk about the things that matter in plays... not just characterisation or even a specific dramatic scenario that the characters find themselves in. But the more important dynamic processes that the playwright and the director are bringing to bear upon the play...what changes and under what circumstances? What is made and what is destroyed? What are the patterns that are created and then broken, in order to be made into something new? Because as far as I'm concerned, if you want to talk helpfully and meaningfully about a play, you've also got to find its essential structure and dynamism, and then you can start to talk about the detail of it, but a play is a pattern that is disturbed and then remade. So is every moment of our waking lives – it happens in our cells and in our organs, and in our social relationships all the time. We begin in a particular situation. We move out of equilibrium, towards chaos. There's a bifurcation point, a split at some point, where either that situation evolves and becomes something new, or it dies. And, you know, it's a brave playwright that will take a system to the point of death – it's a very difficult thing to achieve, but on the whole, because we are alive and because we watch living processes on the stage, we see the other version, the evolutionary change. Shakespeare is the classic exponent of that.

SNB: And we've been using this vocabulary [of change and evolution] about plays for a long time. Maybe not as explicitly, but in terms of 'what is the change in a character by the end of a play', which is a very old idea.

RL: One of the reasons why I started to use a different language – to develop my own language was because I found it sort of frustrating and boring to talk about plays in that rather segmented, classical, dramaturgical

way – where character is something that happens here... dramatic action is happening over here... You talk about a character's arc, and I'm not sure whether that's an architectural term or what it is, but it never really meant anything to me, because it was still separate from the world. The point is that a character exists in relation to other things, and to his or her context.

SNB: Integrated systems.

You think, "Well, how am I going to build a house if I have to put up the walls at exactly the same time as I'm putting on the roof, and getting the furniture?" And yet, that is what we do. That is how we make and create.

RL: You can't separate those elements. And that might be quite a frightening thing, because you think, "Well, how am I going to build a house if I have to put up the walls at exactly the same time as I'm putting on the roof, and getting the furniture?" And yet, that is what we do. That is how we make and create. We put things in relation to other things and we see something we never saw before. Science now recognises this fundamental truth about how complex systems work, and therefore how we have to explore them, which is *in* their complexity. Economics is acknowledging the same thing. There is no aspect of the world that we don't now realise is multiply connected to other things. And the great problems – the environmental and climate related problems and economic problems – are due to the fact that we thought that each part of the system was independent of the other parts, and our nature will perpetually prove us wrong, although we try to impose it.

SNB: And again in the youth theatre context, work is created in a very collaborative way, especially if the director is good at acknowledging that and good at empowering the young people to do that.

RL: That's a much more honest role for a director, as far as I'm concerned. You cannot direct a living system, you can only disturb it. That's the director's role. It's not to take full responsibility for eliciting meaning in a situation, because that's my role, as an audience member. I want to play that part, thank you very much!

SNB: In terms of social networking actually, and those new forms of communication, how do you think their influence on theatre will manifest itself – is it too early to judge?

RL: Well, no, in some ways it shouldn't be too early, because they've been around for a long time. Theatre is surprisingly slow in a lot of ways, for a live form, of picking up on things that music and film can do much more quickly.

There was an amazing festival at Battersea Arts Centre last year, and they're doing it again this year, called

Photo: Olan Wrynn.



One on One, which had about 160 bespoke, individual performances, with one performer and one audience member in each performance, and it was incredible, because it was a really moving experience. It reminded me very strongly of what it is to be a participant in a culture, and how we want to engage, we don't want to be held back from participation. We find virtual worlds kind of thrilling at first, but I think ultimately, deeply unsatisfying. We have evolved for face-to-face communication and for reading very subtle and complex signs in one another, and in the world around us. And spending a lot of our life online, kind of mitigates against that. We know that because of the kinds of research that are being done into people's email communication, and how much more frank and sometimes aggressive it is, and the danger is that you carry those new habits into face-to-face communications. Theatre isn't really picking up on these things, I think... yet. It's the sort of thing that that young writers, and young audiences want to be engaging with – it's a reflection of their lives, but to give it form, and to articulate it in a way that feels full of life and full of depth is really important... not just mimicry of what's actually happening, but some kind of analysis of it at the same time.

SNB: What projects are you working on at the moment?

RL: Well, after this, I'm heading off to rehearsal on a dance project for eight to ten year-olds. It's a collaborative process between Company of Angels, which is a young people's theatre company, and The Place, the dance school in Sadler's Wells. It came out of a structure that had been set up at Soho Theatre with Company of Angels, where they were focusing on the relationship between a dramaturg and a writer in the making of new pieces. And Emma Gladstone, who runs the studio at Sadler's Wells, wondered how that might work, in putting a choreographer with a dramaturg. We're working with third year students at The Place, and they're about to graduate. What's been wonderful about that process is that it's sort of got two parts to it: one part of it has been Robin [Dingemans]'s encouragement of the dancers to make their own material... he stands back, and he's watching the ways in which shapes and potential meanings are developing and the ways in which they might then be arranged in relation to one another. And late in the process, he's started to come in... like a sculptor, actually... he'll say, "Okay, let's change the orientation of this... Let's add a bit more talk here." It's really interesting watching him, because it's quite delicate, and quite late, but he let them find that material, so they have now

got the confidence in it. It belongs to their bodies, and what I'm saying about dance should be exactly the same thing about writers. What is the language that grips your story or subject, and how can you be encouraged to have confidence in that language and to take it as far as you can? And the other part of that process has been taking the work into schools, and to primary schools, and performing bits of it, often without a real context in front of eight year-old, nine year old children...

SNB: And having a response from them?

RL: Getting the most wonderful responses from them. Their attention threshold is so sudden. They fall off it so suddenly. No amount of dramaturgical articulation can express, the way a child can, whether something works or it doesn't, because they live in the present. They live according to the processes and the structures that they feel within them and around them.

I've also worked on a community opera recently with Spitalfields Opera, another piece for younger audiences, which has, once again, been a very collaborative process, working with school children in the East End of London and with community choirs. I have been working very closely with the librettist on that, so it's a dramaturgical process, but it's also a social process and that's what I love. And then the rest of my work is either with [choreographer] Akram Khan, who's making a new piece about Bangladesh, or with Cape Farewell, where I'm developing a big project in Scotland, taking artists and scientists on a boat across the Scottish Islands to meet with and engage with communities, to look at the relationship between place and identity and the resources that belong to a particular place, and I have to say, it might sound as if it's very far from the rest of my work, but it's exactly the same. Everything that I do is about the relationship with place, resources, and the imagination.

SNB: And the interactions between all of those elements.

RL: Absolutely. So, this is just on a big scale, and on a very tangible scale. We're looking at resilience, really, within communities, as we move into the 21st century, with a lot of change happening around us. But that's what I'm doing on a smaller scale with everyone that I've got the privilege to work with. So, it's a good life!

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