

Margaret Ames

A Thousand Miles Apart

*I am aware
I am painting with people and
working with space
and dimensions as
I did so long ago
on canvas.*

Editors note: Margaret Ames is the director of Dawns Dyfed, a community dance project based in the west of Wales. She works through movement and dance with people of all ages, experiences and backgrounds in different community contexts. Dyfed is an area of Wales that is largely Welsh speaking and much of Margaret's work is concerned with Wales, identity and representation and seeks to speak primarily to the experience of being a minority.

The work for *Mil o Filltiroedd ar Wahan* (A Thousand Miles Apart) began with a telephone call from the USA late one Friday night. The conversation was not important but the circumstances reflected that strange synchronicity of events that happens sometimes. I wrote a short paragraph to note the event. The first words were "a thousand miles apart". By morning it was obvious that this would be the title for the new work.

DECEMBER 2004

I called a meeting, sending out letters to people who had been working with me previously. There were twenty-three individuals between the ages of fourteen and eighty-one and from all areas of the county of Dyfed. Additional to this I made it known that this was an open meeting and everyone was welcome. Sitting around three small coffee tables in the lounge at Theatr Felinfach¹ were thirty people.

In this context I speak frankly about the things I am thinking about. These things are abstract and very personal as they are the imagined materials. I try to make a distinction between the personal as disclosure and that which is a sharing and an entry into the creative process. My route in this case was through the work of Hélène Cixous. I quoted key passages from *Coming to Writing* alongside my own written thoughts about distance and loss. For



us, the making of the work begins here. I do not know who will be interested, who will be able to work with me and who will leave without a backward glance. No one had heard of Cixous, but all listened intently and immediately offered personal reflections. This plunging into ideas and concepts is a calculated risk based on the knowledge that these people understand performance as an integral part of their cultural context. The devising of new work is a necessary challenge.

It is here that the performers will begin to slip into and negotiate the creative response. It is here that I will begin to add to my material, allow things to drop and listen to the responses made available to me. The work cannot happen without this contact. This is how people expect to work within the tradition of performance that has come out of Theatr Felinfach in particular, but also within the values of Welsh speaking communities.

The formation of the group also begins here but this group is by no means a stable entity. Within a rural society that is under pressure from persistent symptoms of a dominant English ideology that is dismantling its structures, we must operate with notions of the virtual group that is the group that exists through will and intention rather than actual presence. We must maintain the group through both presence and in spite of absence, through invocation, memory and re-inscription. Naming and recalling will be of paramount importance in this process and *Mil o Filltiroedd ar Wahan* was particularly

dependant on this as we began with a group of thirty and the final piece was created by four individuals. They are Terri Hatfield, Donna Morris, Iestyn Thomas and Jennifer Thomas. In a letter to me, Iestyn wrote of his impressions of the group. He described his colleagues as: "Donna, the amazingly talented young woman, who inspired the rest of the group with her ability; Terri, the fit, healthy, and determined mother; and Jen, the warm, lively grandmother whose determination was matched only by her stamina". Iestyn himself is a funny, creative and intelligent seventeen-year old.

In directing people who do not perform for a living I must work around their work and family lives, their friends and colleagues and indeed the events that happen to them. During this time I kept a notebook of the whole process. The notebook contains messages from the contributors, concerning the theme, but also messages from many of those original thirty who were now our virtual group, writing to let me know that they were unable to make the work, expressions of regret and of personal contact, each one aware of the continuity necessary between us all.

MARCH 10, 2005

In order to explain the themes of this work I will quote from the workbook.

One who comes to mind is my grandfather who is dead now (bless him) - he feels as if he is a thousand miles away, in a place I don't know about... beyond my reach... but sometimes he

1. Theatr Felinfach is situated in the heart of the county of Dyfed in West Wales on the original campus of the agricultural college. The theatre was established by the county council in 1972 to deliver education to the community through the medium of drama and art. It remains at the heart of the culture and continues despite pressures from demographic change, lack of finance etc., to produce cutting edge youth work, stage both new and familiar in house and touring productions and develop transferable skills amongst the community, through a variety of cultural forms and actions.

*feels very close by as well! When I dream of him or I hear or smell something which reminds me... the thousand miles disappear and I can shut my eyes and remember... go back in time.*²

The themes emerging dealt with loss, waiting, and difference. I continued to think about disappearance in the context of death, the individual and the communal, the death of groups, and the effect of loss. We thought about our need as humans to connect with each other and our inability to do so, through lack of understanding, missed opportunity and misreading of need and identity. Despite this rather dense and serious material we also laughed a great deal. We made writing exercises that were based on letter writing and on translation. We worked to see what happened to the narrative in simultaneous translation, how many gaps and disappearance would occur and whether there would be a new narrative borne from this process of estrangement. An example of this work, once again from the workbook, reveals the sense of dislocation, and loss.

*One of the things I thought of is people vanishing. The Marie-Celeste, for instance; I'd really like to know what happened. What is terrible is to think of all those people who lost all those people and don't know what's happened to them. I think it's always best to know what happened.*³

APRIL 4 - MAY 13, 2005

I had decided on images regarding staging and articulation of space. These images included:

Desks, arranged on the diagonal,

facing up stage right.

Lighting that would look like rays of sun, or threads, or moonlight, separating performers, fracturing the space and creating holes, or gaps of darkness and depth.

Writing materials, pen and paper and chalk, and intensive periods of writing letters, anywhere and everywhere.

The magnified sound of someone writing a letter - pen on paper, hand and arm attached through the scapular and the postural shifts through spine and pelvis; moving as if writing, the body inscribing space with language.

A large old fashioned school blackboard.

Writing in the Welsh language is the most articulated artistic expression. Writing for the theatre is a highly worked and traditional form. The body and its presence is suspect in this culture, when it is not representing the dominant ideological forms of musical-theatre and sport. It seemed an important question to ask of ourselves, to discover if there might be a place for physically performed inscriptions of our experiences that place the bodies of the performers as equally articulate and readable as the word.

The physical act of writing, and the accompanying tensions and passions needed to resonate through this work, and my readings of H el ene Cixous were critical to our understanding that writing is more than language, and that language is more than communication: "The flesh is writing, and writing is never read: it always remains to be read, studied, sought, invented."⁴

Throughout all this process of creating and rehearsing we dealt with

2. Evans, M., 2005, personal email (my translation from Welsh)

3. Thomas, J, with Lewis, E., 2005, translation exercise

4. Cixous, H., 1991, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*

personal issues. It is always a process of strained negotiation between the work and everything else. At the beginning and end of every meeting there are negotiations. Who will have to leave early and why, who will be late for the next meeting, and who cannot attend at all, with the range of reasons accompanying the announcement. Mobile phones are not turned off as at any moment family members may need to contact the performer. The drama of real life cannot be left outside the rehearsal. Work is made with whoever is present and this is probably the most defining factor as to the final shape of the piece. There is also a strong drive to ensure that if all are present, all are working and engaged. If special attention is required on any one section, or for any individual, then it can only be given for a short period. It can never be far from the director's awareness that these people are giving their time freely and cannot be left waiting.

So on April 4th, I asked them to write. They wrote their thoughts, letters and lists, they wrote about what they were being asked to do as they did it. They wrote about confusion, bewilderment and acceptance of this strange process of discussion and its remaking into physical performance. They wrote about putting their trust and faith in me, and how risky it felt. When I cleared up afterwards I would read some of these messages of doubt and irritation, as well as the more general and the very private. These writings form an abstract documentation of our process together. They were never shared, but rather left behind, for me, as a casual comment, or remnant of the event. They wrote with an eye on the future, the act of communication with an audience.

We worked with the words "hey you!" and "dere 'ma" (come here). The English had been drawn from the essay on *Ideological State Apparatuses* by Louis Althusser that introduces the term "interpel-

late" or hailing. I had asked the performers to use this idea of being called into existence. I had been thinking about how to physically manage and manifest the notion of minority and alternative ideological contexts, by making plain the resistance to the dominant ideology. The language, the destination of our subject-ness through our language was the first tool to hand. We worked with various tones, and emotions, in the voice and through the body. We laughed a lot. The performers walked, changing directions, looking and waiting for the next vocal command. Their vocal ranges became more adventurous; they experimented with piercing shouts, cajoling whispers, and polite requests.

I asked them to run and attach themselves to another person - be very close, be limpets, be carried, and carry someone. People were laughing and falling over and swinging each other around and they seemed to have forgotten that we were at work. I waited for them to return from this excursion and to recall why they were doing this. It is all so close to us, so present in everyday life. All our rehearsals could be characterised as full of laughter even when we were dealing with the saddest of times.

Jen had made a sequence of moves that came from her thinking about gardening. I had asked people to think about what they do for themselves, when alone, when not having an immediate responsibility to something or someone else. Gardening is her hobby, her love and the thing she spends most of her free time doing from the spring onwards into summer. Her garden is large and very tidy, with small yet special features throughout. I did not know how to use this movement sequence, but asked everyone to do it with her. Jen taught the group, and the group then moved slowly in unison. At this point of unison and repetition, I knew that this was a major part of the whole piece.



A Thousand Miles Apart, directed by Margaret Ames. Photo: Dorian Jones

Garddio (gardening) is a refrain, a chorus, or it is a theme worked on and developed like a Bach variation. This helped me realise that the *Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach, played by Glenn Gould in 1958⁵ must be part of the soundtrack. It was already a possibility, something I had been imagining, and at this point it became clear.

I read from the workbook some notes that the performers had written about physical descriptions of emotional states.

Donna worked with her own description. She wrote: "In the bath - under the water - hearing heart beat - echoes in the room."

She moved by simply lying down and waiting. I waited for something else but it did not emerge and then I realised it was not needed anyway. I am happy to accept almost anything these performers offer. I know we are all working with the same images and experiences. I know we all feel

5. Gould recorded the Goldberg Variations twice, once in the early stages of his career in 1958 and again in 1981 towards the end of his life. The second recording is very different in interpretation and timing to the first.

the same kind of restrained energy and gentle sadness.

We spent an evening trying out different kinds of music for the soundtrack. The work began to disintegrate. I watched them struggling with structure and memory, timing and emotion. This made me realise how far they had travelled with the Bach. They had internalised a certain episodic quality and technique of gliding over the top and just underneath each variation. They knew not to follow the music, not to interpret, but rather to unfold with it. As a result of this information we attempted to make the work using the Gould 1981 recording of the same work. It was a total disaster. Everyone became angry, yet they continued, their bodies alternating tension and passivity. After pushing themselves through this experience we returned to the recording from 1958. They sighed in resignation - they knew it all along and they had to humour me anyway. I did not feel guilty.

At the end of June, over a month after completing this project Terri offered her impressions of the process as she experienced it "from the other side". In this conversation it was clear how much faith and goodwill must be invested in the work and in the director, alongside the more prosaic matter of hours, energy and discipline. She spoke of the director's role as being one of privilege. The emotional investment for this performer was huge, based as it was on her ability to reveal personal material and allow the work to grow from these revelations, whilst in the early stages not understanding how these things would be used and what was expected of her. Because the director held the whole context she was able to venture with this process, but each meeting required the same investment of trust and courage.

The work process reminds me physically very strongly of painting. As an art

student I worked into the grain of the canvas, rubbing and wearing away at the fabric, pushing the thinned oil paint into the weave. I used the whole room, even on smaller scale paintings. I would move to and fro near and far from the image and be aware of seas of colour and shifting shapes through colour, usually content to allow this physical activity to dictate the outcome, content to wait and dance with the materials rather than work towards a formed image from a preconceived plan. In the theatre my body remembers the same dance with distance and proximity. In and out towards and away from people and the images they shape and shift. I am aware I am painting with people and working with space and dimensions as I did so long ago on canvas. This is where I am happiest in life I suspect. I trust this process; despite its abstraction I know it will form meaning. The performers will become part of the fabric of the space in all its dimensions.

I asked the group what they saw in a new image they had built with the tables, placed together as one large table. They knew it was a place of gathering, a family dinner, a celebration. They looked and felt the table cloth and then Iestyn and Donna said: "It's like a bed," and so it was. Donna sat on the chair at the table/bed and created her sleeping movements. She fell to the floor, pulling the tablecloth with her, she slept - it was almost real. After this we worked several images of sleeping alone, at various points in the progression of the work, which is structured by the progression of the *Variations*. Terri sleeps alone with the image of a lover, or a dream of a lover, the hoped for connection with another person created from the folds of the tablecloth. Donna becomes increasingly restless with an energy that demands action, an awakening. One month later I am watching the video recording of the performance and

see to my surprise that Iestyn has taken the sleeping theme and used it for himself. He is curled up right at the feet of an audience member. He appears to sleep under the man's crossed legs. He is incredibly vulnerable, and I had not known of this as he was out of my sight line. He returns to sight, rolling slowly and pouring himself into standing, a dreamer returned from rest.

We still did not have the script that the writer, Euros, was working on. This was the backbone to the work, the element that placed everything else in its context. Everything we had made would be externalised and clarified through the writing and the spoken word. I had been discussing the emerging ideas with Euros from the beginning but at this point we were working with no clear idea of exactly what he would produce. Euros not only worked to create a scripted soundtrack, but implemented the vital part of the whole project, to involve as many other members of the community as possible. In recording the voices of others performing the script, ownership of the work and its themes grew, once again recalling the virtual group and re-writing their membership. The creative relationship continued to extend outwards beyond our immediate location, into the community that had fostered it.

The posters were ready and I phoned Tommi to let him know. This retired headmaster had given his permission to use the letter he wrote to me explaining why he would not be able to perform in the work. His writing is copper-plate perfect, there is a careful fold down the centre of the paper. Neville had devised a method of producing thin golden beams of light with aluminium foil and a pin, Dylan had told me a story years ago about hearing footsteps on the empty stage in the early hours of the morning. He created the sound effect of footsteps, in the way that he remembered

them. In this process of opening the work to others in order to make it, we harvest memories and offer them back to ourselves and the wider community. These projects are made through communal thinking.

We had a discussion about the word "*annwy*" (dear). We discussed how the word in English has perhaps lost resonance. Iestyn found the clearest explanation. He suggested that the word "*annwyl*" carries a sense of innocence within its meaning. Jen mentioned how we refer to the character of a person as *annwyl*, we would not do this readily in English. Rather the individual would take on special significance as we would refer to them as dear *to us*, them becoming the object of our inner selves. Euros began the script with various voices, each speaking the word "*annwyl*", as they read to themselves the beginnings of letters, of personal contacts. The community collects in the words and in the voices. Later the words give us more information and they settle in the space between performer and audience, so we may feel the distance between writer and reader and understand that we are all of these things; both watcher and performer, writer and reader, sharing space and invisible to each other.

I had borrowed seven examination tables from the University. I had already contributed my folding wooden chairs from home and Jen had brought two very similar chairs from her kitchen. We still did not have a blackboard. Then, through a stroke of good fortune, Felinfach School, in the same village as the theatre, removed the old blackboard from the classroom. Dai and Dylan removed the huge piece of equipment, in pieces and worked to re-build it on the stage. It was perfect, it could not have been better. We had been thinking about the work of Waldo Williams, one of Wales' most famous poets, whose writing often inclined towards the mystic. *Pa Beth yw Dyn?*⁶

became the focus of my thinking, but was always more of an informant than a direct source of material. The presence of the blackboard released the image that had remained slightly beyond reach. Jen wrote the first verse of the poem on the blackboard whilst Donna slept, a series of restless moves that lifted her off the floor until she was pulled back to the group and sat with them writing in front of the blackboard, the image of school resonating around the knowledge that we continue to learn throughout life.

The process of making new work in this cultural context is dependant upon relationships and networks of relationships. There is a director with a basic idea which must be communicated to others. These others must commit and trust which enables the work to grow between us. Iestyn wrote a letter about his experiences and here is a short extract:

*Energy, focus and passion are mandatory; there are no half measures in these productions. The theatre is electric during these performances, a kind of perpetual energy.*⁷

We have roles and responsibilities and through this communal sense of responsibility, I am enabled to make my work. This is essentially a communal and collective project for the long term, and I remain always in admiration of each individual who has contributed, for their actions are courageous and principled, adventurous and

committed.

Bibliography

- Althusser, L., 1971, *Lenin and Philosophy in Ideology*, ed. Eagleton, T. 1994 Essex England, Longman Group.
 Cixous, H., 1991, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
 Williams, W., 1991, *Dail Pren*, Llandysul, Wales, Gwasg Gomer.

MARGARET AMES (Wales) is the Artistic Director of Dawns Dyfed, the Community Dance Project for the west of Wales. She works with people of all ages, and backgrounds, in a variety of contexts. She has ten years of performance work with Brith Gof, collaborations with dancers, and the Magdalena Project. Clifford McLucas directed her solo work. Her work in all its forms has always been concerned with Wales, identity, and representation.

6. *Pa Beth yw Dyn?* (What is Man?): this poem in the famous collection *Dail Pren* is noted for a particular image towards the end, *Y Cwmwl Tystion* (The Cloud of Witnesses), which Waldo Williams (1904-1971) uses to convey the inner life of the Welsh speaker in her community with special emphasis on the sense of responsibility towards that community, and to the larger context beyond it. It refers to both the community of the after life, those absent, those around us and the notion of nationhood through brotherhood.

7. Thomas, I., 2005, from personal email message.