

Dylan Thomas 100: a symphony of voices

A Creative Vision by Parthian in Association with Tinderbox Arts Consultants



PARTHIAN

CREATIVE VISION: A SYMPHONY OF VOICES

Dylan Thomas's poetry is technically complex, dramatic and lyrical, but he was fundamentally a man of the people: 'a poet who believes in the greatness of the individual and the sacredness of the masses'.¹ Rooted in the natural world of the body, the life cycle and the landscape of Wales, his writing remains very direct and sonorous even in its most dense moments, which is perhaps why its appeal has lasted.

One of his most famous works, *Under Milk Wood*, brings alive a whole community, merging scraps of speech and dreams into a poetic symphony. This is a very democratic way of using poetry, drawing on spoken language rather than obscure classical references, and the celebration of the centenary of his birth should be this kind of symphony of voices.

2014, the centenary of his birth, is a unique opportunity to raise the profile of Dylan Thomas and of writing from Wales more broadly, both in its home nation and further afield. The anniversary will provide a springboard for a range of new artistic, cultural, educational, and commercial projects, as well as encouraging the people of Wales to connect more actively with their nation's artistic heritage, opening new prospects for their future cultural and literary engagement. We believe that the key to success of Dylan Thomas 100 will be to democratize it: to welcome everyone to participate and to celebrate in their own way.

We envision a year-long celebration of the life and work of Dylan Thomas which shows Wales as a home for artistic excellence and a beautiful, inspiring land, looking towards the future, and competing on a world stage.

Central to this is to ensure that Dylan Thomas and Wales are not seen 'in a rearview mirror', as relics of a mythologised past, but as inspiration for the future. The centenary is an opportunity to revitalise his status and the study of his work, while cultivating a new generation of creative talent.

¹ M. Wynn Thomas and Daniel Williams, 'A Sweet Union? Dylan Thomas and Post-War American Poetry'.

The festival is organised around five guiding themes:

- Between the Covers of Books: Education and Learning
- To Wales in My Arms: Tourism
- Sailed and Set Dazzling: International
- High Hill and Green Fuse Events
- In This Our Age: Digital and New Media

These themes will run throughout and shape the festival, ensuring that it nurtures and supports learning, welcomes and inspires visitors, connects with a wider world, and includes a diverse range of artistic events at all scales and for all the people of Wales.

Dylan Thomas himself was a champion of new media, excited by the possibilities of television, radio, and other forms of modern communication, and the festival should sustain this interest by encouraging and promoting new media projects and producers.

The centenary celebration should also seek to embrace and support both languages of Wales, in recognition of Dylan Thomas's own fascination with bilingualism and the influence of Welsh poetic forms on his work.

Although he has become one of Wales's most celebrated figures, in his own time Dylan Thomas was seen as radical, and this spirit of iconoclasm should be explored through innovative and challenging projects.

While he drew his inspiration above all from his roots in South West Wales, Dylan was also a man who travelled the world and took this inspiration with him. As Professor Wynn Thomas has written: 'Dylan Thomas emphatically does belong to the Welsh; he also, but differently, belongs to the English, and to the Americans, and indeed to the whole wide world.'² This centenary should celebrate his legacy beyond Wales, seeking to engage with an international audience.

This anniversary celebration should maximise the number of people who take part from Wales and across the world, and the number of ways in which they can contribute to and

²² M. Wynn Thomas, 'He belongs to the English: Welsh Dylan and Welsh-language culture', p. 132. Edited quotation.

explore it. Therefore, alongside high-profile events with maximum reach and impact, there should be a raft of exciting grassroots and education projects, developing and showcasing the skills of people across Wales.

This centenary event has the advantage of the backing and enthusiasm of the cultural organisations and the people of Wales, and support throughout the UK and internationally, as shown for example by the great success of the recent production of *Under Milk Wood* by schools across the Chou Chin region of China, the American university which is collaborating with the Dylan Thomas Centre and the National Library of Wales to plan a tour of Dylan Thomas' manuscripts, and the interest and expertise of the British Council which has contributed to the discussions so far. This Creative Vision proposes ways to harness this goodwill, ensuring that enthusiasm is organised into a coherent and exciting programme of activity which evokes public, media and commercial interest.

The Creative Vision outlines a way to bring together all these projects in a year-long celebration that will put the spotlight on Wales, prioritise its vibrant literary life, bring visitors and business in, and ensure a lasting legacy for Dylan Thomas and his work.

DEVELOPING THE VISION

Key stakeholders and partners were consulted between February and May 2012 in order to develop this Creative Vision and to identify shared objectives. A report was produced based on these consultations.

The report outlines a Creative Vision of a festival as a celebration of Dylan Thomas' life and work which showcases Wales as a place of natural beauty, home of literary and creative excellence, looking towards the future and out to the wider world.

The success of the festival will depend to a large extent on impact, focus and profile. Individual events, no matter how interesting on their own terms, do not necessarily add up to a celebration that is more than the sum of its parts. The Creative Vision is therefore intended to bring coherence and shape to programme planning, providing a

context for the good ideas that already exist, and providing inspiration for new and innovative ideas.

It includes recommendations for selecting and commissioning events, both major and small-scale, which will make the festival a success. It outlines criteria which could be used to judge and assess applications for funding, and discusses how funding can be allocated and managed.

It proposes an Event Spine, shape and duration for the festival, lists projected outcomes, and suggests the legacy which could follow beyond 2014. It makes recommendations for the project going forward, and identifies possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which could affect the way the project develops. It also lists further sources of information and bibliography.

OBJECTIVES

Those consulted were asked the following questions:

- What would you like to see achieved as part of DT100?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges and do you have any suggestions for overcoming these?
- What would you be able to contribute to the centenary?

From these consultations and the draft objectives drawn up by the Steering Group, we have drawn up the following list of Objectives for the festival.

- To produce a high-quality, all Wales and beyond, event- and education-led festival to mark the centenary of Dylan Thomas's birth.
- To promote a programme of high-quality creative activity that features, or is inspired by, the life, work and influences of Dylan Thomas, which keeps his legacy alive for new generations.

- To help the people of Wales to recognise and celebrate Dylan Thomas, to raise the profile of Dylan Thomas as a cultural icon within Wales.
- To provide an entry point into Dylan Thomas and his work, creating a new shop window for the work and for Wales. This should be used to inspire other writers and artists who will in turn inspire others about Wales: its landscape, its people and its literature.
- To encourage the use of new digital media and to create an online platform with a range of digital resources and applications, which is a hub for information, creativity and communication.
- To encourage dialogue between visitors, academics, researchers, artists, teachers and students.
- To encourage the development of creative, reading and literacy projects, particularly involving young people.
- To engage with local areas associated with Dylan Thomas to help enhance community spirit.
- To help raise Wales' international profile, as an inspirational, creative country to visit, invest in, and learn in, focussing on key markets in UK including London and Oxford, and abroad, the USA and other countries where there is existing interest in Wales which could be built upon.
- To drive visitor numbers and spend to all parts of Wales associated with Dylan Thomas in 2014 helping develop a sustainable Dylan Thomas trail beyond 2014.
- To be a truly bilingual festival, allowing all the people of Wales to contribute to and learn about their heritage in both of its languages.

- To offer opportunities to discuss and explore Dylan Thomas's work at a range of scales and in a range of settings, allowing as many people as possible to take part in this exciting celebration.
- To foster new educational and artistic collaborations, along with offering sponsorship opportunities to companies based in Wales, which can have a life way beyond the festival year.
- To leave a lasting legacy that inspires future creative activity and helps stimulate the creative industries sector in Wales.

In order to make the vision of DT100 a reality, it should include programmes of work which give opportunities to as many of the organisations currently involved in the Dylan Thomas legacy as possible. Through encouraging them to share objectives, jointly beneficial outcomes could be developed. DT100 should continue to work across local government, councils, and privately owned enterprises and tourism initiatives.

THEMES

Five themes will run throughout the festival, helping to focus and harness the energy of all concerned. Although not necessarily mutually exclusive, the first four themes will inspire, guide and shape all of the activities that take place, helping to achieve the festival objectives. Alongside these, the fifth overarching theme aims to place digital and new media at the heart of all festival activity.

i. **Between the Covers of Books: Learning and Education**

*I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on
in the world between the covers of books
such sandstorms and ice blasts of words...³*

Interpreted broadly as learning in all formal and informal settings, in communities, and for all ages, but with education in Welsh schools and universities at its heart. This could include writers visiting schools throughout Wales, a teachers' conference to share inspiration and ideas for teaching Dylan Thomas works, and an academic conference at Swansea University. This theme is about maximising opportunities for people across Wales in their communities to learn about Dylan Thomas, his vision, and his work, as well as bringing together high-level academic expertise to enlarge and progress the knowledge of Dylan Thomas. It could include any project which has learning about Dylan Thomas and literature at its heart.

³ Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry'.

ii. To Wales in My Arms: Tourism

Molten and mountainous to stream

Over the wound asleep

Sheep white hollow farms

To Wales in my arms.⁴

Bringing people in to all of Wales, in particular the South West, through Dylan's work. This theme is about celebrating not just the places directly associated with Dylan, but also the landscapes and coastlines that inspired him and which colour his work. It involves not only attracting visitors and providing a warm welcome, but also shaping and exploring the vision of Wales held by those who live here. 2014 is a unique one-off opportunity, with Visit Wales in the lead, to attract new visitors into Wales who may return time and time again to market Wales as a literary destination and to give a focus to tourism promotion in the South West in particular. By encouraging all of the organisations with an interest in Dylan Thomas to work together, it also represents an opportunity to develop a coherent strategy and a sustainable Dylan Thomas 'trail' in Wales, like Jane Austen in Bath or the Brontë sisters in Yorkshire.

iii. Sailed and Set Dazzling: International

I make this in a warring absence when

Each ancient, stone-necked minute of love's season

Harbours my anchored tongue, slips the quaystone,

When, praise is blessed, her pride in mast and fountain

Sailed and set dazzling by the handshaped ocean...⁵

Looking out beyond Wales to the world stage. Dylan Thomas was a poet who, while always inspired by Wales and by Swansea in particular, took this inspiration with him to London, Oxford, New York, and the wider world. His work continues to resonate globally, too, with

⁴ Dylan Thomas, 'Prologue'.

⁵ Dylan Thomas, 'I Make This in a Warring Absence'.

fans in China, India, Australia, etc. It is vital that this is not an insular festival, but one which shows Wales as a nation which engages with different countries and continents, tapping into opportunities for building cultural and commercial relationships around the world. As a poet who was heavily influenced by Welsh language poetry, and whose work shows an abiding interest in the question of bilingualism, there is also an inherent interest in translation and in inviting different languages and cultures to engage with his work, and to add to the symphony of voices.

iv. High Hill and Green Fuse Events

O may my heart's truth

Still be sung

*On this high hill in a year's turning.*⁶

Showcasing and supporting Wales' creative excellence in the arts. Two types of events are proposed: High Hill Events, high-impact, high-profile, and Green Fuse Events, smaller and more community-based. Artistic excellence and audience reach should be priorities for all events. However, while the 'High Hill' Events should have the potential to make a high-profile impact and commercial returns, the 'Green Fuse' Events will encompass a wider variety of events, from small grassroots community-based projects to cutting-edge artistic endeavours. These events collectively should allow people from all areas and communities of Wales to participate in and feel part of the centenary, building into a true symphony of voices.

⁶ Dylan Thomas, 'Poem in October'.

v. In This Our Age: Digital and New Media

*In this our age the gunman and his moll,
Two one-dimensioned ghosts, love on a reel,
Strange to our solid eye*⁷

Dylan Thomas was a man who celebrated the new media of his time and was inspired to use it in exciting new ways which drew on the technology to enhance and shape his art. As Walford Davies writes, when *Under Milk Wood* was first broadcast in 1954, 'the idea of mankind speaking on the air *without wires* still retained some wonder'.⁸ This festival should encourage participating individuals and organisations to make full use of the possibilities of new media, creating a platform to share words, performances, and other creative digital projects. New media offers a way to really develop the symphony of voices. This overarching theme runs through and alongside all of the other four themes, guiding all of the festival activity.

⁷ Dylan Thomas, 'Our Eunuch Dreams'.

⁸ Walford Davies, Introduction to *Under Milk Wood*, edited by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (Everyman, 1995), p. xli.

CREDITS

This document was created by the Dylan Thomas 100 Consultancy Team.

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