

**chwedl** (n. fem)

1. story, account, legend, fable; tidings, news, report, rumour; saying, adage.
2. lifetime

The word *chwedl* in its various forms covers every type of narrative utterance including the very act of speaking itself, as well as gossip, folktales and stories from the Mabinogi.

A *chwedl* is a primarily oral event and, even when transferred to vellum, seems designed to be heard aloud. The primary focus of a *chwedl* is a set of relationships rather than a product, and there is a feeling that those entities in the stories not present in the telling, including characters, locations, objects and magical ways of being, are somehow summoned in the telling and listening. The telling of a story is an event, and the story structures itself around events - things that happen. The alleged facts behind the story, any supposed moral or lesson, the tale type and its international variants all take second place to the story's verisimilitude – its 'this happened-ness', which is a phenomenon we create in community.

My initial experience of great storytelling was at the first ever Beyond the Border Storytelling Festival in 1993 in the grounds of St Donat's Castle. For the festival finale a Frenchman called Abbi Patrice stepped on stage and told a Norwegian folk-tale from the nineteenth century Asbjørson and Moe collection. It was among the most arresting, direct and accessible performances I had ever seen, and I walked out of the tent at the end of the performance knowing what it was I was going to do with the rest of my life. It was the simplicity and directness of delivery that got me, and its uncompromising physicality in which I felt that we all – teller, audience and story – were fully present, and I wanted more.

A few years later I was standing on a low stage with a number of civic dignitaries in a pedestrianised Newport street near where the new Friars Walk shopping centre is now. There was a small crowd of people in front of me and a large life-sized statue of an ox, which we were all there to unveil. My job was to tell the story of the ox, how it had been seen by the pirate and villain Gwynllyw in a dream sometime around the sixth century. The huge white creature with a big black star in the middle of his forehead glowered down at him, and when he woke up Gwynllyw thought no more about it. Sometime later he saw the same ox but this time for real and he immediately renounced his evil ways, became a saint and founded his church where the cathedral now stands in Newport. And that was it. When I took the booking I had assumed that there would actually be some sort of coherent narrative, but at this rate my contribution to the proceeding would be about thirty seconds long. What to do?

Of course, it was the ox that had the answer. Clearly there was more to this storytelling business than performance *élan* and a cracking good story, and as I poked around Gwynllyw's story I discovered that the creature Gwynllyw had seen was not any old ox but a specific example of the Ychain Bannog, the great white ox that wanders through Welsh mythology and folklore from Culhwch and Olwen to stories of the saints and the many Lady of the Lake legends that populate our country. So when the ox looked at him, Gwynllyw knew that he was also part of the story and that he had better work out what his role was to be.

And me too. I was as implicated in this as much as Gwynllyw and I realised that I had to work out what my part was in all this. Gradually I discovered bits of our stories, ancient and modern within the landscape of Wales, and how the lives of those who live and lived here, our own imaginative listening and the traces we leave behind for others make a network of material, symbolic and narrative connections that we can revisit, renew and re-imagine.

Last autumn the company had been praying for good weather for the photoshoot in Snowdonia for *Dreaming the Night Field*, a new show we had been working on based on the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi. We only had a couple of days to get it all done, but it looked like the weather was going to ruin everything. As it happened, when we got to Tomen y Mur (home of Blodeuwedd and Lleu in

the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi and the site of a fateful love triangle) there was a moment when the sun suddenly scorched a hole in the clouds, and we had time to drag ourselves, an accordion and a harp to the top of the mound as the sunlight bounced off the undersides of the clouds lighting up the landscape in a dazzling and otherworldly emerald green, with the nuclear power station in the background.

This new project is all about the sentience of the landscape and how our lives knit us into it and reflect our living back at us, and it was very apt that the very place that holds so much of the story's magic and passion made us wait, work and sweat to get what we wanted. In fact as a result of the struggle we had more time in the landscape on its own terms, more time in the pub in Trawsfynydd chatting with local people, more time negotiating with the landscape and getting to know it.

All three of the performers in *Dreaming the Night Field* are Welsh speakers but were not born here. I came to Wales at the tender age of twenty-one, just in time for the miners' strike, after blagging my way into the job of administrator with a small-scale theatre company and wandered into my first Welsh class not long after that. Learning Welsh as a young adult was my first experience of successful language learning and I went on to teach adults as a tutor myself. I had the great privilege of watching people renegotiate their way into their own language, and the joy, pleasure and confidence that comes with it. I've caught the language bug since then, but it was learning Welsh, the language of the place that I made my home and brought up my children, that allowed me to be aware of the slippery process of turning abstract sound patterns into intentional utterances. This ability to conjure meaning and intention out of noise is one of the things that makes us human, and the further leap into conjuring events that are not actually happening now is the shared skill that has prompted so many thinkers to name storytelling as a fundamental aspect of humanity.

For *Dreaming the Night Field* we worked with visual artist Maria Hayes, and the four of us absolutely had to visit Llech Ronw, the stone behind which Gronw Pebr hid as Lleu threw his spear at him when it was show-down time. I had visited the site several times before in the past. The stone is surrounded by three smallholdings whose names vibrate with the action of the story. Lech Goronwy (Gronw's Stone), Bryn Saeth (Arrow Hill) and Bryn Gyfergyd (the Hill Opposite the Blow). The fact that the names of these farms predate the discovery of the stone by centuries leaves us with a big cognitive gap, and it is a struggle to know what to do with it. We could dismiss this and declare that 'This is the place!', or start searching for other archeology or bits of story that could help create some thesis or other. Or maybe not. Maybe the gap is the point and maybe we should just listen.

'Landscape' is often treated as an inert surface on which we put our roads, houses and shops, however when the climate decides to give it all a stir the storied depths of the bits of the world that lie just out of sight come into view. Remember the 4000 year old red deer antlers discovered off the coast of Borth in the Spring of 2016, or the bits of the forest that used to grow in Cantre Gwaelod reappearing after the great storms of 2014, so that the inhabitants of Aberystwyth had the vertiginous experience of waking up after the storm and looking out to sea, but seeing a forest instead that, in fact, had been there the whole time...

There is an almost overwhelming temptation to say that 'there is some truth in the old stories after all', but I would prefer to move onto the more alluring and interesting possibility that what we are dealing with is experience and not just fact. The fact that there is a story about the inundation of the land by the sea does not make the old stumps that appeared after the storm more real or factual. What the story does is link us to a landscape that our forebears lived in and mythologised, and that for a moment our gaze and the gaze of those who lived here before us are united in the same landscape through the medium of the story. It is not the story as repository of narrative form that makes it interesting, but as a conduit for experience so we and our ancestors stand briefly in the same place and share the same view.

In his classic title *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* the psychologist and educationist Jerome Bruner talks about how our minds seem to have two different modes: the narrative and the factual. In the narrative mode our imagination is drawn into the gaps in the sense-making process, and fills it with meaning, cause and intention. Indeed, without the gaps we have no role as sense makers in the landscape. The anthropologist Tim Ingold talks about these same gaps as places that let you deeper into the weave of the story and landscape in a continual, communal improvisation. Bruner's two modes of knowing come together in Giacomo Rizzolatti's research into mirror neurones, which are central to an embodied, intentional and gap-filling way of being in a shared world, while sharing stories that feel real in the telling.

So we stand in a landscape and feel it affect us, and feel that this place holds the traces of other people who have also been here. We read intention into the world around us; and the landscape seems to be some kind of dynamic recording device where the actions of others hold their form for a period of time. We can be witness to these actions and furthermore pass them on in the telling and retelling of what happened.

One of the frequent observations among storytellers is that the event of storytelling is something that even audiences new to the form seem to understand how to respond to. They understand that the storytellers are subtly and intuitively changing and adapting how they tell the story for that specific audience and space. I believe that when they sense this, even unconsciously, those listening take it as a compliment because the performer is letting them know, through their actions, that the audience is important – they matter and without them this would not be the same event.

In my experience both tradition-bearers and effective revival storytellers have the ability to slide from one mode of telling to another, so we can be clearly in this world together sharing a joke about something in the news or the state of the weather and, without knowing how it happens, we are suddenly talking of gods, goddesses and mythical creatures with the same verisimilitude and literalness.

In the moment of telling, characters do not 'represent' anything and the story has no 'message'. In the moment of telling and listening the most important thing is that 'this happened'. It is important to get some distance on the material and its presentation, and there is no shortage of perceptive and challenging writing to help us do that, but the actual work of storytelling is a profound, public and multivalent exercise in empathy and attention, for the audience and storyteller.

Michael Harvey for [Planet keywords series 2017](#)