

Miliwn o Ddawnsywyr Cymraeg: A million Welsh dancers

Based in North Wales, Independent Dance Artist, **Angharad Harrop**, addresses the role dance can play in providing opportunities for young people and families to use and learn Welsh outside the classroom



In 2017 the National Assembly for Wales released CYMRAEG 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers. The release of this strategy marked the 50th anniversary of the first Welsh Language Act, published in 1967, and outlines how the Welsh Government will approach achieving the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Education is at the heart of this proposal though, and beyond that, there is the recognition that Welsh needs to live and breathe beyond the classroom. Acknowledging that for the possibility of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 to become a reality, Welsh needs to be “an integral element of all aspects of everyday life” (1). This article will discuss the role dance can play in achieving the aims of CYMRAEG 2050.

Price and Tamburelli highlight in their 2016 study how often Welsh can be viewed as a “language limited to formal ‘high’ domains” amongst adolescents. Their study also explains that there is also an “inherent association of Welsh with formality as well as tradition and patriotism” (2) within this age group and that views such as these can lead to cultural disengagement and a reluctance to speak the language outside of educational settings. CYMRAEG 2050 recognises that these preconceptions can arise when there are few opportunities for young people, living

in predominantly English speaking areas, to use Welsh beyond the realms of their formal education. Within the strategy to achieve a million Welsh speakers emphasis is placed on the importance of accessibility to Welsh language activities that build and strengthen communities. Providing experiences of value, such as those pertaining to dance discussed within this article, to young people within social and community environments can help to prevent negative associations with the language arising at formative ages.

There are many arts organisations working throughout Wales providing opportunities for people to use and learn Welsh within their community through dance. I have been fortunate to be involved in many projects that place the Welsh language at the centre of community development through dance.

Pontio, the Arts and Innovation Centre of Bangor University, in Gwynedd is just one example of an organisation that is ensuring provision of Welsh language arts activity for the whole community. Integrated into their artistic programme which includes circus, dance, comedy, drama and opera is BLAS, an ambitious participatory programme. It offers young people the opportunity to be involved in the arts within their community through the medium of Welsh. BLAS has three strands of activity: weekly drama workshops, health and wellbeing arts projects and youth arts projects that run in conjunction with professional companies that visit Pontio.

One such company is balletLORENT who first collaborated with Pontio in 2016 on their production of Snow White. The cast of 11 professional dancers were joined on stage by 12 local children aged between 6 and 9. They returned in 2018 to perform Rumpelstiltskin with an intergenerational cast of children and elderly people. I worked with the children, selected from local primary schools, in the run up to the performance developing their skills and confidence in dance. The children involved in the project came

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from various language backgrounds, some spoke Welsh at home and in school whilst others came from non Welsh speaking homes and attended either Welsh or English medium education. The sessions were fun, energetic and directed through Welsh. They encouraged the young people to form new friendships and gain valuable experiences with positive associations to the Welsh language.

Dance is well placed to help people of all ages and abilities acquire language, as the language that is being learnt is given meaningful context through the movement. As linguists Gregory and MacGahran point out, the use of movement to teach language means that the “the language represents a concept and no translation has been involved, and there is no direct instruction of the rules of the language. Instead students intuit the rules from the language they are learning’(3). The children attending the project who only spoke Welsh in an educational environment were given the opportunity to develop their language skills outside of the classroom. Welsh is given a meaningful context within their lives as they socialise, make new friends and learn new skills through the language.

The week before the performance balletLORENT dancers, Natalie Trewinnard and Gavin Coward, returned to bring the two generations of the community cast together to rehearse their roles in the show. The intergenerational aspect to this project is particularly important to note as it brought the young people on the project into contact with elders in their community who speak Welsh, an opportunity many may not normally have. The older cast members who spoke Welsh also felt valued and empowered that they have a skill and knowledge they can bring through the language by encouraging and fostering a love for Welsh in a younger generations. Within the whole group rehearsals leading up to the show a community was created between all members of the cast, the balletLORENT dancers, children and the older generation. The collaboration between BLAS and balletLORENT succeeded in creating a community on stage. Although the language of the rehearsals with the company was English, the groundwork in developing and strengthening the relationships between the children took place through Welsh, giving both languages equal status on the project. The relationships, formed through dance, upon which the community of performers was founded gave credence to the show and resulted in heartfelt performances from all. This on stage community has been able to strengthen the off stage community and provided a lasting legacy for the project within the relationships that have been formed and the empowering experiences

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that were felt. Many of the children involved have since begun to attend the weekly BLAS sessions, furthering their engagement with the Welsh language outside of the school environment.

Providing opportunities such as these, to be able to speak Welsh within the context of performing with an internationally renown touring company, gives value to how the young people involved in the project view the status of the Welsh language. Welsh does not become solely the language of education but an integral part of life as Welsh becomes the language of friendships and memories that form our identity. There are many organisations providing opportunities for all to dance through the medium of Welsh within their communities, Dawns i Bawb, Hijinx, Miri Mawr, TRAC and Ribidirês to name a few. Through their ongoing work and commitment to ensuring Welsh language provision of dance activities for all ages and abilities, dance can play a key role in achieving the target of a million Welsh speakers. These opportunities for all to experience the joy of dancing with others through Welsh, allow for a love of the language to emerge from embodied experiences of passion and pride that bring communities together.

Info

angharad.harrop@hotmail.com

www.angharadharrop.com

References

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