BIG HOPES and other plays

By the same author, published in Methuen Drama

Crazy Gary's Mobile Disco

The Shadow of a Boy

The Drowned World

Ghost City

Plays 1 (includes **Crazy Gary's Mobile Disco, The Shadow of a Boy, The Drowned World, Cancer Time, Fags**)

By the same author, published by Sherman Cymru

Amgen : Broken

GARY OWEN

BIG HOPES and other plays

Llanybydder Mart
In the Pipeline
An Enemy for the People
Father Figures
A Mare at Christmas
Big Hopes

Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru
Arts Council of Wales

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Caution

Cover photo courtesy of Kath Embling, Rachel Lewis, and Mel Smith.

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Introduction

Often writers are asked where they get their ideas from. The general and truthful answer to that question - some of them I think up myself, some I get from the world - never seems very helpful. Saying a little about the origin of several specific ideas might add up to something more illuminating, even if the explanations are individually quite prosaic.

The plays in this collection came mostly from the world, rather than from me. The first, *Llanybydder Mart*, was written because the Sherman Theatre's then artistic director, Phil Clark, had seen my play *The Shadow of a Boy* at the National Theatre in London, and was determined to mount a production of it in Cardiff. When this eventually happened, early in 2005, Phil asked if I might come up with a brand new piece as a curtain-raiser, a world premiere to present alongside the Welsh premiere of *The Shadow of a Boy*. Around the same time, I took the TrawsCambria bus to west Wales, and noted that it had changed its route, diverting off the road from Carmarthen to Lampeter to stop off at Llanybydder. I mentioned this to my mother and she said that she had always hated Llanybydder. This seemed an extreme reaction to a pleasant enough rural town. I asked my mother why she felt so strongly, and her response was the story which became *Llanybydder Mart*.

In the Pipeline was written because Radio Wales decided to produce a series of one off plays that were in some sense, about Wales. I pitched an idea about the Sports and Social Club at Pembroke Power Station, which had been bought out by its members and survived long after the power station had been dismantled (my father had worked at the power station, and was part of the committee which took over the club). I set out to Pembrokeshire to research the story, thinking that although the taking over of a social club might make for a plausible pitch (and that mainly because of its echoes of the plot of *Brassed Off*), it probably wasn't brilliant material for a drama. I imagined I'd have to invent thrills and spills along the way, and manhandle the story into becoming a madcap, heart-warming romp.

What happened was that even as I made my way to Pembrokeshire, stories and characters launched themselves at me from every angle. The conductor on the train sat next to a boy carrying two cat boxes, and spewed out his life's history; friends of my family heard there was some writer going round looking for stories and passed along tales of their own. And then a walk through the woods with my father and uncle Derek lead to a slightly spooky discovery, and the play more or less had written itself.

An Enemy for the People had a less blissful genesis. I went to a conference organised by the Arts Council of Wales on the state of Welsh theatre. The conclusion of the day seemed to be that theatre was failing to connect with the society around it, and that no-one could really see how we might fix this. I came away feeling - like most other people who attended - profoundly demoralised. A few days later, Adele Thomas of RuthIsStrangerThanRichard, one of the most exciting companies making work in Cardiff, agreed that if I would write her a play that unashamedly tried to address big issues and might have something to say about Wales, she would do all she could to put it on. We decided that we should imagine we *were* the National Theatre of Wales (and no such body existed, or even looked like it might soon come to exist, at that time), and take on a topic a National Theatre of Wales would have no choice but to wrestle with. Self-government seemed the obvious choice.

I'm straightforwardly in favour of devolution, which left me a bit stuck when it came to writing drama about the subject. No good drama comes from certainty or comfortable places. Then I remembered an old friend confessing to me, perhaps even somewhat shamefacedly, that she was against devolution because she didn't think there were enough leaders of calibre in our tiny nation, and that left to our own devices we would most likely make things worse. At the time I had dismissed her doubts. Post-1997, totting up devolution's least glorious moments, I felt a stab of fear. And fear is a place I can write from.

Starting with the thought that there might be a dark truth at the heart of devolution, I was reminded of a famous play about a man who comes to know a dark truth - Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. I took the heart of my plot from that play and inverted it to revolve around a protagonist who is not Ibsen's upstanding hero, but a compromised, conflicted, fiercely pragmatic politician who believes he still has a nugget of idealism at his core. Adele began to put together a production, and (as per the Goethe quote about action which is so often trotted out by people who manage to pull things off) helpers, supporters and collaborators came to our aid. James Tyson at Chapter agreed to co-produce the show, and programmed it as part of the Passion season. Sgript Cymru offered as much help as they could, and a crew worked for free or for fees that insulted the efforts and hours they were cheerfully putting in. Arriving like the cavalry, the Arts Council of Wales gave us project funding which meant we could put some money where it needed to be - on stage, with a fantastic cast of professional actors, all accepting the minimum we could legally pay them, and with Charlotte Neville's ambitious set transforming the black box of Chapter Stiwdio and harking back to the joint roots of theatre and democracy in the forums of ancient Greece.

Three Assembly Members from three different parties - Leanne Wood, Jenny Randerson and Lorraine Barrett - helped us with the texture and detail of political life, and participated in debates we arranged around the production. We packed as many as we could into the Stiwdio, and still found ourselves turning people away from the last three or four shows. After the production, we were immensely heartened when the Bush Theatre in London and the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh both offered to take the show if we were able to mount a tour. But ultimately there was no more funding to be had from ACW, and we had to abandon plans to remount the production.

Father Figures came from an invitation to contribute to the Ignition Festival at the Tristan Bates Theatre. The core of it was a five minute piece called 'The Lane', which was a more-or-less direct transcription of a story told me by my father[1]. I'd originally thought that it was to be one short piece within an evening to which three or four writers would contribute. About a week before the performance date, I realised that I had misunderstood, and my work would be the only piece presented that night. Contemporary theatre audiences are often kindly disposed towards shorter works, but even so, five minutes was pushing it a bit. So at short notice I cast around, and found two more pieces lurking in my head. The first, 'She's Your Daughter' was paraphrased from an overheard conversation. The second, 'Pete', was something from my life that would not have come out, except under pressure. It's been performed a few times now, at one of Paines Plough's Later evenings in London, and at Dirty Protest in Cardiff, and been honed with each outing, and now I'm very glad I did write it.

A Mare at Christmas came about because Dirty Protest asked me to contribute to one of their brilliant evenings in the yurt at Milgi, on City Road in Cardiff. At the time I was writing a large scale piece called *Mary Twice* for Bridgend Youth Theatre, a comic fantasy distantly inspired by the Mari Lwyd tradition. Guy O'Donnell of Bridgend Council's Arts & Culture department had dug out a wealth of research material about the Mari. An interview from the 1970s in manual type told the story of a group of men digging up the skeleton of a horse they had known as children, and using its skull to make a Mari Lwyd. Something in the tale struck home, and *A Mare at Christmas* was the result.

As I've said, the pieces in this collection have been taken fairly directly from stories or events in the world, rather than from my imagination. *Big Hopes* takes that tendency to an extreme. It is a piece of verbatim theatre, constructed entirely from words spoken by the group of young people who

1 I've written about the process by which this particular piece came into being elsewhere: see the article 'On *Father Figures*' in New Welsh Review 81, Summer 2008: or from my website, www.gary-owen.co.uk/articles.

eventually performed it. The play came about through Theatre of Debate, a collaboration between the Prince's Trust and the education department of the Royal National Theatre. The idea was that writers would engage with groups of young people to create short pieces of theatre directly tackling hot political and social topics. The Prince's Trust has established XL groups all over the country - groups for 14 and 15 year olds who are, for whatever reason, not going to school. I worked with a group based at Pethybridge Youth Centre in Ely to create a short play which they would perform first at the youth centre, and then on the Lyttelton stage at the National.

Creating verbatim theatre is far more time consuming than making everything up yourself. That might seem counter-intuitive, especially given that I've written here of several occasions on which a story presented itself to me, and a play came out of it fairly smoothly. If you're wandering through the world and a perfectly-formed story happens to appear before you, it honestly is like getting a play for free. The process of creating verbatim theatre is rather a different one. You pick a group of people or a source matter (transcripts of court proceedings, for example), and commit to making a story, somehow, out of whatever material you unearth. There is interviewing, transcribing, sifting, selecting, arranging and re-arranging until, finally - if you are lucky - a narrative emerges.

Spending time with the young people of the Ely XL group, it became obvious that underneath the cheek and stroppiness, they were desperately lacking in confidence. One of their tutors, Gary Fish, kept discipline with a mixture of firmness and calm, and they had no problem dealing with that: they swore at him and called him all sorts behind his back. But when he praised them for doing things well - as he would at every opportunity he got - they froze up, were stony-faced, didn't quite know how to take it. Any setback, however small, risked dispiriting the group to the point where they gave up completely on whatever it was they were trying to do. And so it became clear that, while this project should (and definitely would) be a challenge for the group, the last thing they needed was to be set an impossible task that would leave them exposed and demoralised.

My feeling was that I needed to write a piece that was very clearly based in the kids' own experience. I thought this would allow the kids to basically play themselves, rather than asking them to act (one of our rules was that there would be no auditions: anyone who committed to being part of the project, would get a part in the project), and also I hoped it would give them a sense of their own lives as being fascinating and worthy of being made into art. Verbatim theatre seemed the obvious way to go, but theatre fees are not massive, and the commission for a fifteen minute play would never have given

me to the time to go through the verbatim process.

At this point I was rescued by a bit of synchronicity. In the months before, as my interest in making stories out of other people's words grew, I'd applied for and won a Creative Wales Award from the Arts Council, allowing me to do a substantial chunk of research in verbatim theatre. By making the Prince's Trust play part of my Creative Wales project, I'd have time to make the kind of work I thought the kids needed, while getting to start my research project by seeing a verbatim theatre piece from conception to completion, and then have a little time to reflect on the process before moving on to do more verbatim work.

I'd been tipped off that bullying and knife crime were two areas the young people might want to talk about. But when I asked about bullying, they all trotted out the responses they knew they were supposed to give - that if someone was a bully, it showed more about them than about the person they were victimising. And in fact, who the hell was I to expect these kids to open up to me, a stranger who'd come wandering into their youth centre, asking about things that were sensitive and difficult and painful?

They were willing to talk about other things - why they had ended up in the XL group, rather than going to school, and what their aspirations were for the future. A couple of them talked about wanting to be actors, but with no real idea how they might realise that ambition. As we took the kids on a tour of the National Theatre, I couldn't help but think that, though we would be right to give them every encouragement in their ambitions, the reality was that even if they possessed the raw talent, they would have a much harder time becoming actors than would the children of wealthy families, who could support them during the apprentice years of working for nothing. I had found the subject matter for my piece of Theatre of Debate - social mobility - and Abi gave me my title. *Big Hopes.*

Working with the XL group was demanding and rewarding in about equal measure. I stole from Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* - which uses a writer interviewing soldiers as a device to tell its story - and constructed a play about me interviewing the kids as research for a play. Director Adele Thomas and actor Phil Ralph (playing Gary the writer) bonded with the group instantly. The kids were determined to do as well as they could, but when things didn't come immediately they were easily put off. Several of them had problems outside the group which meant they had to leave the project before it was completed, despite having made huge contributions in the early weeks. The first performance, at the Pethybridge Youth Centre in Ely, was ragged but full of fun and energy, and the audience loved it. Despite that success, one of the cast simply didn't turn up for the minibus to London, missing out on the

chance to perform at the National. Tom, a member of the group who hadn't been seen for weeks, did turn up, however, and offered to step in. Coached by the rest of the cast, he learned the part on the three hour drive down the M4.

The London performance was, inevitably, more of a fraught affair. The group were out of their comfort zone, they had found themselves on a massive stage staring into a cavernous, and mostly empty auditorium, and they had to cope with a professional sound equipment which was much fussier than the five pound mike at the youth centre. Worst, they were part of a double bill with a group of older performers, and instantly felt themselves to be in competition. They performed brilliantly (or so I thought: and I was a perfectly unbiased judge at this point) but then the post-show talk, which had originally been billed as being about the issues raised by the shows, became a talk about the creation of the shows. A gentleman from the audience, no doubt meaning only the very best, asked the group if they now felt they were ready to do 'a proper play'. Afterwards, they told it to me straight. 'We lost, didn't we,' said Christian. 'We should've done something that was about something, not just us,' said Chelsea.

Just over a week later, and frantic organising by Adele, Sue Barker of Prince's Trust, and Sian Summers of Sherman Cymru meant that the group got to perform the play one last time, as curtain-raiser to a Sherman youth theatre show. Phil Ralph was already on his next project, so I had to step in and play the role of Gary, the writer. As the seats filled up, Carly had an attack of nerves and threatened to walk out. Callum said he would go if Carly walked. I asked Carly what was making her so nervous. She nodded towards the audience. 'This lot,' she said, 'they look like aliens.' I told her that she could go if she wanted, there was no problem, and Adele would read in her lines: but that if she stayed, she'd be fantastic and would always be pleased with herself for having given it a go. I can't claim my brickbat-subtle reverse psychology was responsible, but one way or another Carly did stay, and so Callum stayed too: and they *were* both fantastic. Unrehearsed, I got most of the lines wrong and was mocked mercilessly for it by Christian and Shane.

Lots of people who saw *Big Hopes* told me how good it was: that it was funny, and sad, and occasionally shocking. Callum and Tom from the XL group joined Sherman Cymru's youth theatre, and I bump into them around the building every now and again. Callum watches every show that comes to the Sherman - straight plays, dance, experimental drama, performance art - and has strong opinions about everything he sees. '*Big Hopes*,' he said to me the other day, 'that was a shit play, that was.'

Cardiff, March 2009.

LLANYBYDDER MART

This play was first performed at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, on February 18th, 2005.

Liz	Nickie Rainsford
Directed by	Gary Owen

Liz, in her late forties, early fifties.

I hated being a kid.

Any moment, any day, the ground could disappear underneath you.

You'd be carrying on quite happily and suddenly - you were in trouble.

You had no idea why.

And no idea what you could do, to get out of trouble.

I remember one time me and Moira.

We had these great big bikes, three-wheeled bikes, we'd seen something or found something and we were riding back to the house to tell mum and dad.

We got to the house ran in going mum, dad.

Dad was there in the kitchen.

Did you just ride across that field, he goes.

What've I told you, he goes.

How many times've I told you?

You ride along the side of the field.

You ride by the hedge.

I've told you. I've told you both.

And what did I just see you both do?

And that was it for us.

Bed with no supper.

And I can't even remember now, what it was me and Moira were so excited about.

I just remember all that excitement going cold in my throat.

And marching upstairs to bed.

And getting undressed.

And making a point of not crying, not even a bit.

Once dad'd gone out, Ninnie crept up the stairs with a few slices of bread and butter, and milky tea for the two of us.

Then the tears came, of course.

Pause.

Back then I used to get thirty pounds for breaking in a pony.

Dad would let me keep every penny.

Which was amazing because everything with Dad was about money.

That sounds horrible. But it was sort of true.

It sort of, became true.

The house where we lived, wasn't ours. We rented it.

We'd rented it for years, and the landlady was a nice enough old woman but my dad.

It was like he couldn't settle.

He'd always be on that she could have us out anytime she wanted.

Then all the work he'd done on the house and the land would go to nothing.

In the end he decided was gonna have the house off her.

For that he was gonna need money.

More money than he had, and more money than he could make off our land.

So he started scrimping and saving.

Some bloke down the road from us went bankrupt, Dad had enough to pick up his couple of fields that bordered onto ours.

With the extra land, we were bringing in extra money.

Dad kept on saving, and before too long he bought a few more acres.

And then a few more.

And then a few more again.

And he carried on like that. Working every hour he could, saving every penny he could, buying every scrap of land he could till we had a decent sized farm, making decent enough money.

Bit of an achievement.

He didn't take much pleasure in it.

Because the heart of the farm, the house we lived in, was not ours.

It could be snatched from under us at any time. It could all just disappear.

Any moment. Any day.

But whatever Dad offered the landlady to sell up, she always thought he could offer a little bit more.

And he would offer more, six months later. And she would still say no.

And so it went on.

The horses I think he felt guilty about.

It was like they were - a distraction.

Cause though they were there to make money, he loved them.

Not like the farm work: he was good at the farm work, but he did it cause it

paid.

With the horses, he properly loved them.

It started cause Teddy Bishop down the Mason's Arms had bought his daughter a pony, and needed a field to put it in.

And we had this field out the front of the house that was boggy most of the year, and good for nothing.

So we took in this pony, Trigger, and Dad built a little lean-to.

Then Teddy Bishop's daughter loses interest in Trigger. Stops coming up to feed him and muck him out.

So I start Trigger, and grooming him, and mucking him out. Dad starts charging this bloke an extra few bob a week for my efforts.

And like everything Dad did, it just sort of took off.

All we really had was this field, this lean-to, and this grumpy dapple grey mountain pony. But down the pub, the legend grew, and word got round the district we had this thriving business, stabling and breaking in ponies.

People started coming to us, wanting them to stable their horses and break in their ponies.

Thing was Dad didn't have time to be breaking in ponies.

I was gonna have to do it.

I wasn't sure, but Dad said I'd be fine. He told me I had good hands, I could feel what a horse was up to, when it was thinking about having a bolt.

He said he'd tell me the secret of breaking in ponies, if I'd let him whisper in my ear.

He was smiling, and it made me nervous, cause he was such a crotchety old sod usually if he smiled you'd look up to see what was about to hit you.

But I said oh all right then and he came up close and put his mouth to my ear, and he whispered - the secret is, when you take a pony out to ride her for the very first time, make sure you do it just after heavy rain, when the ground's all

nice and muddy.

I said why's that Dad, does it calm the pony down, or what?

And he said no not a bit of it, but at least you'll get a soft landing when she chucks you.

He laughed liked anything.

And that was something you'd hardly ever see.

Like I say, he properly loved the horses.

But he was always a bit on guard about them.

As if they might lead him astray.

Pause.

We had some beautiful horses stabled with us in the end.

I'd be riding point-to-pointers in the off season, galloping them round the Rhos and Llys-y-fran.

But my favourite was always our first little pony, Trigger.

We had him for years and Teddy Bishop's daughter'd came up to ride him maybe half a dozen times.

I couldn't blame her, though. Nobody could ride Trigger. Not my dad, not Moira.

Nobody but me.

Anyone but me got on him, he'd be a little bugger, rearing and bolting, all his tricks to get you off.

But for me he'd behave. Mostly.

I don't know why he'd behave for me, he just -

She stops.

I got to thinking of him as being my pony.

At first just my pony in that if we took people out for a hack, then of course Trigger would have to be my pony cause no-one else could ride him.

But after a while, he was just - mine.

For years, he was mine.

Then Dad told me Teddy Bishop'd decided to sell Trigger, and I'd have to get him ready to take to Llanybydder mart.

I remember the feeling, of the ground being gone.

I didn't argue, of course.

You didn't so much argue with your parents, in those days.

But I tried to think, what could I do, how could I stop it.

At first I asked Dad if we could buy Trigger.

Dad said, what for? He's no use to anyone. No-one can ride him.

I can ride him, I said.

Dad said what, you'd rather trot round on some grumpy little pony, when there's proper horses you could be riding?

If I'd've said yes, I would rather be trotting on my grumpy little pony that would've been answering back. And you didn't, in those days.

On the way to the mart, me and Dad talked about - birds we saw out the window, cows we saw in the fields, cars we saw on the roads. We talked about what tractors were value for money, what tractors were expensive foreign rubbish. We talked about anything we could.

And then we got to Llanybydder.

And I said I would just stay in the Landrover.

And Dad said, who d'you think's gonna show Trigger? I can't show him, he'll play up with me and no-one'll touch him.

I said Dad, you're gonna make me show my own horse to be sold?

And he said, no love. I'm gonna make you show Teddy Bishop's horse to be sold.

And you're gonna show Trigger as best you can.

And we'll get the best price we can.

And then we'll go home.

So we get Trigger out of the box.

We walk him to the ring.

We get our number.

We wait for our turn.

And our turn comes.

Dad says to me, right.

You show them what they'll be getting.

And he turns, and hops up into the stalls.

And the auctioneer is calling my number.

I head into the ring. I take Trigger round for a first lap.

And I catch my Dad's eye.

He is, very gently, smiling at me.

And so I, very gently, give Trigger a squeeze.

He bolts across the ring. He rears up and whinnies.

I make a show of getting him back under control.

And then I give him another little squeeze and, away he goes again.

And I catch Dad's eye. He is smiling still.

I hear the auctioneer asking for bids.

Not a peep.

The auctioneer lowers his opening price.

Still no takers.

I'm doing one final circuit of the ring.

The auctioneer is saying that if there are no bids at all, he'll move on to the next lot.

I'm turning to take Trigger out of the ring.

And someone waves. Someone makes a bid.

I look to my dad.

The bid is nothing, a couple of quid.

I look to my dad and.

He's just about to raise his arm.

He's just about to raise his arm and make a bid of his own. A bid for me.

I see his fingers stretch and his arm start to lift.

And he turns away.

Walks off.

And Trigger gets sold. For a couple of quid.

In the Landrover on the way back Dad turns on the radio, puts it onto the news.

He makes conversation about wars and people starving in foreign countries and how lucky we are.

I stay quiet.

That night he comes and sits on the edge of the bed, makes sure I've said my prayers.

Tells me things'll be different once he's bought the house.

Once we own our own home there'll be firm ground to stand on.

A bit of money to spare.

But not till then.

Till then we all have to put up with things we don't like.

My dad dies in that house, ten or twelve years later.

And he still doesn't own it, even then.

He dies carrying bales of hay out to some horses, one freezing January.

Fifty-two. Heart attack.

He falls in the field, and dies there.

He loved those horses. Properly.