

Interchange Meets @...

Interchange (Bradford Writers' Network) meets every Tuesday from 8pm at the Irish Democratic League, Rebecca St, just behind the New Beehive, Westgate.

The sessions are informal and provide a sounding board for members' work, as well as constructive criticism and feedback should this be required.

Support, encouragement and words are at the forefront of the group's activities, and all kinds of writing is welcomed: poetry, short and long fiction, plays, memoirs, articles and songs.

Inside this issue...

Andrew Crowther, playwright interviewed; campaign to save short fiction

Saving Private Story

Is the short story dying? Can it be saved? Mark Cantrell reports on the Save Our Short Story Campaign, which hopes to answer both these questions

ONCE upon a time, the short story was the staple diet for the writer; he could earn a decent living churning them out and there was no shortage of places to buy them.

But since then, outlets have declined, and less anthologies are now published by mainstream publishers.

The shortfall has been taken up by independents, but this means that authors are less likely to be noticed.

According to research conducted on behalf of the Save Our Short Story Campaign, the number of fiction anthologies published over the past three years by both mainstream and independent publishers has risen. However, a couple of large initiatives account for the greatest proportion of this increase.

Single author collec-

tions have fared less well. The number of collections published by mainstream publishers has fallen from 215 in 2000 to 135 in 2002.

Independents have stepped into this void rising to 287 in 2002 from 203 in 2000.

"This has implications for short story writers," say the campaign team. "They are likely to receive smaller advances, less exposure and less high street distribution. The most common reasons cited for buying short fiction were that they had been seen in the shops and were at a discounted price."

The research was co-funded by Arts Council England (ACE) and the Scottish Arts Council. It was carried out by Book Marketing Ltd, and the full report will be on the campaign website later this year (saveourshortstory.org.uk)

The report *SHORT*

STORIES: Desk Research Report includes statistical information on publishers, general consumer purchasing, public libraries, periodicals and best-sellers.

The next stage of the research follows, exploring views on the state of the short story. This will, hopefully, allow a greater understanding of the area, ready to raise the profile of the art form.

Along with ACE, the Save Our Short Story Campaign also consists of New Writing North and Arts Council North East.

The campaign aims to: increase the number and visibility of high quality outlets for short fiction, give the short story more prestige and a higher profile, enable writers to specialise in the short story, and encourage and promote exciting short fiction.

Andrew Crowther on inspiration: "I sit in the cellar and scream. Poking myself in the leg with a sewing needle seems to help." Full interview inside...

BACK ISSUES FROM: <http://www.tykewriter.supanet.com/tw/>

Mild-Mannered & Foul-Mouthed Confessions Of A Bradford Playwright

Welcome To Paradise, was a comic dystopia, where every vice imaginable has become a moral virtue. Darkly funny and cleverly written by new playwright Andrew Crowther, it was a daring venture for all concerned. Here, Andrew confesses all to **Mark Cantrell** — and he doesn't even swear once!

YOU might want to be careful should you ever meet Andrew Crowther, because he likes to spend his time putting words into other people's mouths. But then again, as a playwright, that's his job.

Actually, you'd be better listening very carefully because Andrew is a fast and vibrant speaker. Obviously, he is a man with things to say about the world around us, but the speed is less to do with lack of time and a lot to say, and more to do with a nervousness born of a shy disposition.

Indeed, Andrew confesses to being more at home in the world of words, and has been ever since his tender school days.

"I was incredibly shy and awkward at school," he says, "and I felt much more comfortable writing than talking. I've been writing stories and things since I was at school. I suppose I was about ten when I realised that I was actively good at English as a subject. I loved the world of books and I started writing stuff for the fun of it."

In those days, he went through a phase of imitating the books he read. 'Embarrassing imitations' as he put it. One example he felt able to exorcise from his literary

soul was a series of stories based on Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker books. *Oh dear.*

"They were probably exactly as bad as you'd imagine," he adds. "I threw them away years ago."

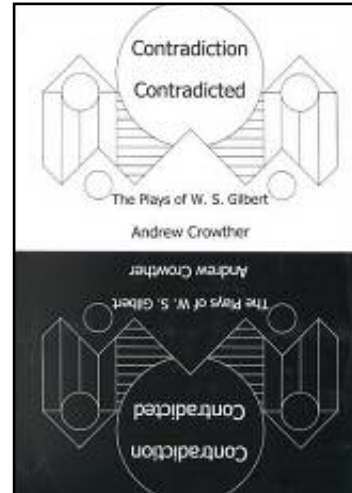
Shame. So, no embarrassing surprises in store for the future then, unless some diligent and forward-looking refuse collector has them stockpiled somewhere (see *Tyke Writer's* contact details on the back page if you do!).

He might have played the mimic game in common with a lot of writers, but he has learned as he read even from those tender early years.

Wodehouse taught him prose style and plot construction, for instance, but other influences are many and varied. He reels off a list:

Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, H G Wells, Samuel Butler, Robert Sheckley, Voltaire, Joe Orton, Alan Plater (writer of the 80s Beiderbecke TV series), Preston Sturges, a Hollywood writer/director of 'screwball' comedies in the 1940s, and... then Andrew runs out of breath.

Once he's breathing normally again, taken a sip of his beer, and is not looking quite so blue in the face, he hits us with



Above Left: The man himself, mild mannered Andrew Crowther, who added another success to his belt with the production of his play *Welcome To Paradise*. Above Right: The cover to his book about W S Gilbert, published in 2000 by Associated University Presses.

yet another confession: he regards W S Gilbert (of Gilbert & Sullivan fame) to be a major influence to his work.

"In fact, it's almost an obsession," he says. "When I first got into that stuff I just enjoyed the jokes and the silliness. But as I read more of what he wrote, I realised he was expressing an intelligent, critical and satirical view of life. Gilbert has made me look at the world in a critical way. I don't think I could have written *Welcome To Paradise* without him."

Such is the obsession with Gilbert, that between 1995 and 1998 he earned himself an MPhil from Bradford University by writing a postgraduate thesis on Gilbert's plays. From that, he also became a published author.

"After a bit of huckstering I managed to get the thesis published by an American academic publisher called Associated University

Presses," he adds. "The book's called *Contradiction Contradicted: The Plays Of W S Gilbert*."

Essentially I wrote the thesis because I think Gilbert is a very underrated writer. I wanted to pay Gilbert back for everything he'd given me. Oh, and the kudos of having had a book published too."

With the plug firmly over, we can go on to say that Andrew has tried writing all the 'proper stuff' as he calls it. "Unpublished, of course. But I am beginning to realise that I am simply better at theatre," he says. Theatre is also where he is gaining his track record as a writer, with several amateur dramatic productions of his work behind him. Though he might not get to the top of great playwright's ladder, these take him a few rungs up at the very least, and provide encouragement

Continued on back page...

Directing the written words

Andrew Crowther's latest play, Welcome To Paradise, was directed by Matt Blackmore. Here Matt talks to Mark Cantrell about the collaboration and the complexities of turning words on paper into living theatre

“I was very much looking forward to directing [Andrew's] new play. I like the way that he writes and in particular how his characters are consistent in their actions and choices. Also, the idea of directing a play about a hedonistic society was too good to refuse,” Matt says.

Directing such a play was also a daring step. Daring because of its themes, daring because it was new writing. But this is something Matt very much enjoys. “I love working with new writing mainly because you can't go wrong,” he says. There's nothing to compare it to and no preconceived ideas — even subconsciously — so it allows the freedom to explore and express ideas without people saying it's been done before. There is also the thrill to put the first performance on. What better way to get your fifteen minutes than by creating art that will hopefully continue forever.”

For Andrew, that means tak-

ing something of a back seat, though it would be wrong to say that his role comes to an end. As Matt explains:

“My personal opinion is that the writer must let go once a director has started working on a piece — but I would say that, wouldn't I? The usual way that I work is that if a writer/ actor can coherently argue as to why their way is best then that's the way it stays. In everything you do there has to be some compromise, and a play is no different. A director will never get exactly the pictures that are in his head out onto the stage, especially when a piece of work starts to belong to the actors. That's when the director must let go too — so the good writers and directors tend to get used to that fairly early on.”

Welcome To Paradise opened in June, but Matt and Andrew were working on it as far back as December last year. The process of compromise began from those early days. “Andrew and I have a fairly robust relationship,” Matt adds. “Once again the principle

of coherent argument stands. Some of WTP was re-written after Andrew and I had talked, but the majority of the ideas were not taken up because Andrew is the writer and I respect his ability. Similarly when working on the show, Andrew has gone along with some of my ideas because he trusts and respects me (I hope!).

“In terms of casting, I have the final say. As a director I have to work with, cajole, threaten, hug or discipline the actors. That's my job. If I am going to do that I like to have some say on the people I work with. Other people may work differently but the main thing is to set the boundaries early on. If you are going to have a division of labour make it clear from day one so that no-one gets upset at any point.”

Compromise and letting go. Both are lessons all writers might benefit from at some stage in their career, not just playwrights. And it must work, for the play was indeed excellent. Doubtless, we have not heard the last of Crowther & Blackmore. Or is it Blackmore & Crowther? They'll sort it out. Remember the spirit of compromise, guys!

Andrew's credits...

Welcome To Paradise (June 2003). A biting black comedy about life in a world where today's vices are tomorrow's moral good. Played at the Priestley, directed by Matt Blackmore.

Thursday Night Live (February 2003):

Featured readings of *Smokeless Zone* and *the Devil and Miranda* (from the *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (see below))

Comeback (November 2002): A ten minute play as part of the Great 21st Century Yorkshire Play (aka New Yorkshire).

Treadmill (June 2002): Part of the Summer Shorts evenings of the New Writing festival

2002 at the Theatre in the Mill.

Let's Talk About Something Else (June 2002): A five minute play that was part of the By the Rules evening of the 2002 New Writing Festival.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (March 2002): Staged by the Bradford University Theatre group and directed by Matt Blackmore.

Smokeless Zone (March 1999): A ten minute play run as part of the Consequences by Bradford University Theatre Group at the Theatre in the Mill.

Contradiction Contradicted: The plays of W S Gilbert (2000): Published book, derived from his MPhil thesis from Bradford University. Published by Associated University Presses.

Andrew tells all...

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for his next steps.

The latest rung was *Welcome To Paradise*, directed by Matt Blackmore and staged by Actors' Community Theatre at the Priestley in June. In it, Andrew portrayed a dystopian satire where today's vices were tomorrow's ingredients for a model citizen. It's a world where good citizens drink to excess, take drugs, trade meaningless sex with a string of partners and swap STDs like mobile phone numbers. And there's a very special 'secret police' who make sure you live up to these social values. *Or else*.

Totalitarian or the ideal consumer society?

Whatever, it was a cleverly written and funny play, albeit foul-mouthed and potentially offensive. Mary Whitehouse would've loved it (privately).

Andrew might have been inspired by his hero Gilbert, but the play came across as Kafka with his tongue firmly in his cheek (or at least somebody's cheek). As a piece of stagecraft, however, it began life as a novel: *Double Insomnia*. And it didn't work.

"Frankly, it doesn't work as a novel," Andrew says. "It's self-indulgent and the plot falls to bits about half way through. I don't think I have the patience for long-haul writing — two or three hundred pages of brilliant prose. If you plan a plot in advance, you know how the story's going to end and by the time you've reached that last chapter you're so bloody bored with it that you simply can't get the enthusiasm to write it

properly."

Pity the poor novelist. That must be why Orwell described the process as "a horrible exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness".

Andrew continues: "Plays only have to be seventy or eighty pages — much easier. And I find dialogue much more fun to write than narrative prose. In dialogue you're flitting from one person's point of view to another's, without a narrator to say what the writer thinks. I like that anonymity."

Not quite so anonymous, however, because if he wants to see his words made flesh on the stage he has to present his babies to the critical eyes of others. That's something all writers

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face at some time, but for the playwright it's a rather more up close and personal experience.

Even though the playwright has conceived the project it will be subject to changes and modifications by directors and even actors. Plays tend to be far more fluid creatures than poems, short stories or novels. Think of them as something perpetually in progress.

But that doesn't mean that the process is negative. It can broaden and deepen the playwright's experience and skill as a writer. As Andrew says he has found from first hand experience during

rehearsals: "Learn what works and what doesn't," he says.

Sometimes, the experience of seeing the words made flesh can be surprising. "With *Paradise*," Andrew continues, "actors sometimes asked why their character said or did something — and the real answer was that it helped the plot or it was a feedline for another character. I haven't thought from that character's viewpoint, which is a black mark against me as a playwright. So I just keep quiet and let the director and actors work it out and at the end a character who might have been a bit 'cardboard' when I was writing became fleshed out and more 'real'."

As in life, so in writing, it's all a learning curve. The play was something of an experiment, Andrew adds. "I just went for it one hundred per cent without worrying too much if it was going to 'work'. Matt Blackmore showed a terrifying amount of faith in me by agreeing to direct the play — even before he'd read the script. There were one or two line changes, and he decided against some of the 'physical theatre' bits I had in the original script, but it's actually surprising how little the script changed in rehearsal."

Which is surely a credit to the writing and the writer.

Only time will tell if Andrew can continue his success and make the grade as a top-flight playwright, but with *Tyke Writer's* endorsement behind him he's sure to get... *somewhere*.

(*Erm, sorry, Andrew.*)

The *Tyke Writer* is the monthly newsletter of the Interchange (Bradford Writers' Network).

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Editorial contributions are welcome, but will be edited for space and style.

All contributions must bear the author's name, which may appear as a byline. Contributions are also preferably received in type written form.

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