



*Bradley Manning has appeared constantly in the headlines, and is now the subject of a National Theatre Wales play. Jo Caird discovers his link to the Valleys and why now is the time to tell his story*

On 26 May 2010, US army corporal Bradley Manning was arrested in Iraq on suspicion of handing classified data over to the international whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks. After being held initially at a military prison in Kuwait, under charges relating to leaking thousands of diplomatic and military documents, he was transferred to the maximum security prison at Quantico military base in the American state of Virginia.

### Welsh heart

Over the following months, as newspapers around the world ran story after story on the shocking revelations released by WikiLeaks, Manning was kept in conditions condemned by Amnesty International as 'inhumane'. Classed as a maximum custody detainee and kept under a prevention of injury (POI) watch, the soldier – as yet untried and unconvicted – was

kept in his cell for 23 hours a day, made to sleep in only boxer shorts, checked by guards every five minutes during the day and forced to stand naked outside his cell in front of other inmates during inspections. Following international criticism of his treatment, Manning was moved in April 2011 to a medium-security facility at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where the POI order was lifted.

Just around this time, up-and-coming Welsh playwright Tim Price was under commission by National Theatre Wales (NTW) to write a political play about Wales as a world power. Price picked up on the little-reported fact that Manning's mother is Welsh and that the soldier

had lived in Wales as a teenager. 'That fact just blew me away really – that he'd gone to school, done his GCSEs and AS levels in the same education system that I'd gone through and he was at the centre of the biggest story of this decade', explains Price.

Weeks before NTW was due to announce its 2011/2012 season, the playwright approached the company's artistic director John E McGrath with a major change of plan – dropping the project they'd been talking about for a year and telling the story of Bradley Manning – 'a global story with a Welsh heart to it' – instead. McGrath went for the idea and the production was announced to the press before Price had written a single word.

'I don't believe that there's another theatre in the country that would respond so dynamically to a change in programming with so little to go on', says Price, who has since impressed London critics with his debut

“A global story with a Welsh heart to it”





Playwright, Tim Price

NTW's artistic director  
John E McGrath

For *Once* at the Hampstead Studio and follow-up, *Salt, Root and Roe* at Trafalgar Studios as part of the Donmar Warehouse season.

## Engaging students

A year later and *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning*, a site-specific touring show directed by McGrath, is about to open at Tasker Milward School, the West Wales high school which Bradley Manning attended between the ages of 13–17. The production has three strands to it: Manning's school days in Wales; the period of his life between joining the army and getting caught up in the WikiLeaks scandal; and the 24-year-old's experience in military jail.

Both McGrath and Price are quick to point out that it is not a theatre-in-education show, but a piece of work for a wide range of audiences that happens to be taking place in schools. However, that being said, NTW is very keen to encourage younger audiences not just to attend but also to take an active part in the work. McGrath explains that during the rehearsal process for *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning* the team will spend time at Tasker Milward, and the other schools on the tour schedule, working with students on the themes of the show, as well as discussing theatre more generally. 'You start off trying to make a play struggling with questions and having conversations, so starting those conversations with young people in the school is really important', the artistic director says.

## Community engagement

The conversations will continue during and after the tour too, with audiences invited to engage with NTW online. Each performance will be live within an interactive environment designed to facilitate discussion, and the community section of the NTW website will continue to buzz with Bradley Manning-related chatter, as it has done since well

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before rehearsals began. The company will be providing links to the various campaigns around the Manning case, as well as encouraging audience members of all ages to get involved with NTW through TEAM, its local ambassadors scheme.

Absent, however, from the range of resources available is a traditional teachers' pack of the sort produced by many companies. McGrath explains, 'We decided fairly early on that we wouldn't create a separate education department for the company, but we would look at how we engage with young people in the work as a whole and always ask those questions. So, rather than creating that kind of step-by-step teachers' pack, what we're trying to provide is a whole body of material that people can use and interact with'. He adds that if any teachers, or indeed any other members of the public, have questions about NTW's work, the team is ready to respond to them directly. It is part of the holistic approach to community engagement that informs everything the company does.

But even if *The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning* is not a show created specifically with students in mind, it's certainly a piece of work that will resound with younger audiences. Price predicts that 'the people who will understand the most will be teenagers, because it's of their world really, much more than the average theatre-going patron'. From the way that information is disseminated in the internet age, the remarkable reach of hacking, to the individuals and groups involved in the wider context of the Manning story, this is a

thoroughly 21st-century play that will especially appeal to audiences coming of age.

## World change

At the time of writing, the date of Manning's court martial has not been set – he faces 23 counts including aiding the enemy – but it's likely that the trial will take place in May. As Manning's legal team are working against the clock on a defence that they hope will save him from a guilty verdict, which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, NTW will be bringing the young man's story back to the community in which he spent his formative years. 'What I want is for the people of Wales to see Bradley Manning as part of a long tradition of radicals who've stood up against the status quo and said, "this is wrong". Wales has a fine tradition of that and I see Bradley as part of it.' says Price.

For McGrath, Manning's age is central to the narrative. Price said that the soldier 'is an example of people in their early twenties that are making a huge political impact, and that ranges from the occupy camps seen in London and Bristol, to the Arab Spring demonstrations, through to things that are happening that people are less comfortable with, such as the London riots. There is a huge body of change going on and much of it is created by the generation in their early twenties. It's time for people to think more about that and what it means and to try and make sense of the ideas'. In terms of making work that speaks to, and of, young people, theatre surely doesn't get more relevant, modern or engaged than this.

**The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning** will tour across Wales from 11–28 April. For more information and to book tickets visit: [www.nationaltheatre.wales.org/whatson/performance/ntw18](http://www.nationaltheatre.wales.org/whatson/performance/ntw18)