

Write of passage

As it gets harder to translate new writing into plays on the stage, different methods are being used to develop it. **Jo Caird** considers whether traditional readings still have a role for authors trying to sharpen up their work

New writing is thriving in the UK. Artistic centres such as the Soho Theatre and the West Yorkshire Playhouse support writers with development schemes, workshop seasons and masterclasses.

But as it becomes increasingly difficult to stage new plays in the current climate of arts funding cuts, audiences with a taste for bland adaptations and commercial producers unwilling to take financial risks, companies and independent producers have had to become more inventive.

In 2000, Battersea Arts Centre started Scratch Nights – staged performances of works in progress, with an informal discussion between the audience and artistic team in the bar post-show. This concept is now a global phenomenon and has led to fully staged, commercially successful productions of a number of shows,

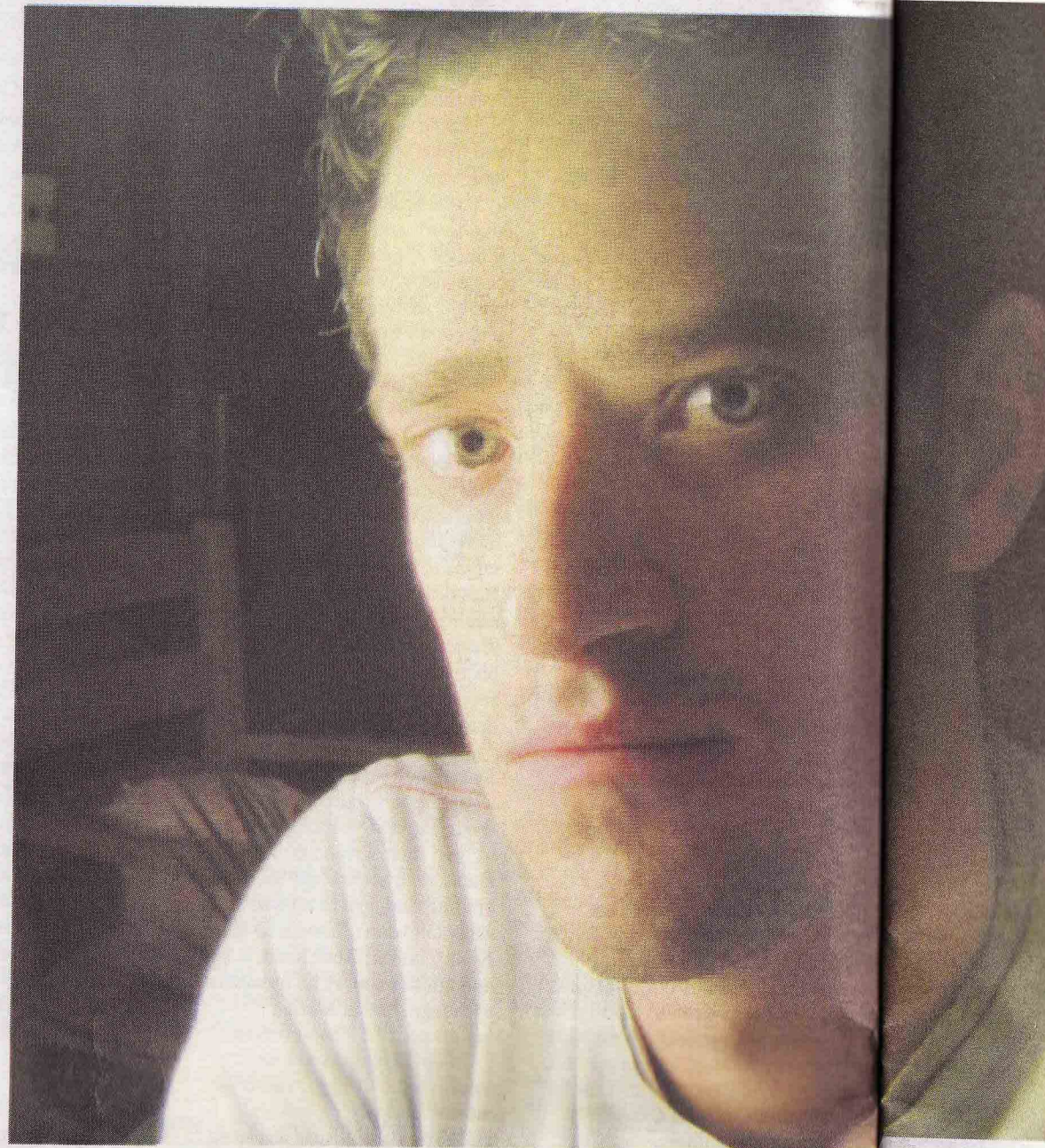
the most famous of which is Jerry Springer – the Opera.

With this production format proving so successful in terms of developing new work, is there still a role for the traditional reading?

In July, a series of readings was held at the North Wall Arts Centre in Oxford as part of a theatre week programmed by the National Student Drama Festival.

Writers Benjamin Polya, Ernest Hall and Chris Perkin took part in the event. They agree that readings are invaluable because of the opportunity to hear what works in a play and what doesn't.

Polya's *The Conviction of Sam Atkins* is a history play set during the reign of Charles I. He explains: "Once you've heard actors read it, you hear the characters' voices more clearly, and certainly much better than you do reading it yourself."



Playwright Benjamin Polya took part in readings at the North Wall Arts Centre in Oxford

Hall's play, *See You in My Dreams*, a black comedy set in 1947 Bradford, is very different from *Polya's*, but he found the same thing – that hearing it brought him greater awareness of his own writing. “The way they interpreted certain lines made me look at those lines differently,” he says.

Perkin was still writing his play, *Home*, which tells the story of a couple's involvement with the anti-war movement, on the morning of the reading. He viewed the North Wall event as an opportunity “to get back to writing and have a deadline” after a period of doing other things.

Hearing a play read, says Perkin, “you realise exactly what it is, whether your ideas come through or whether they don't”.

However, when actors are given so little time to rehearse a reading – usually only a couple of hours – there is only so much they can bring to it. The cast of *Home* saw the script for the first time at a two-hour rehearsal on the morning of the reading.

Perkin says: “I think in retrospect, they probably didn't have time to look at the text and see what worked and what didn't, to make bold choices.”

He can understand the limitations of the reading process because he has experienced the benefits of working with a cast in a more intensive way. Rehearsals of Perkin's first play, *Like Skinnydipping*, began before he had written the second half, a decision that allowed him to work with actors to “find what the characters were and what they might do”.

Polya is aware of this problem too. On reflection, he feels the traditional format is not entirely appropriate for his play – which is “very complicated” – because of the time constraints.

“The problem with having something ideas-based as a reading is that it puts actors at an enormous disadvantage. If they had four weeks' rehearsal, they would obviously understand what the passion is... They can only do as much as they understand.”

The traditional reading by definition focuses on a play's text, while a work in progress presentation can involve other theatrical components. With 11 actors sitting in a semi-circle and reading from scripts, *Conviction* was the straightest of the North Wall readings. *Polya* was eager to take a back seat creatively and leave the interpretation to his cast and director, but was adamant that the reading should not include movement. “I don't think you can get it right in the time you're given to rehearse it and it diminishes from the play.”

Hall believes there is still a place for the traditional reading, but is wary of those that do not take risks. “A company sitting around a table, just reading, can be boring,” he explains. *Dreams* was a staged event, but it was the third reading they have done of the play, with the same director on board. Two members of the company were also the same. The result, even after only two hours of rehearsal, is a convincing piece.

These readings represent three stages of writing development, from

the unfinished first draft *Home*, to the production-ready *Dreams*, via *Conviction*, which *Polya* feels is one draft away from completion. The writers are all positive about the experience, each taking different things away with them – Hall is now convinced that his play is “worth fighting for”, *Polya*, who finds it hard to be critical of his own work, is glad of the opportunity to get the opinions of others, particularly industry professionals, and Perkin has realised that *Home* does not work in the way he originally intended, but hopes that what he has written “will help one day in knowing the characters better”.

Readings may be valuable in terms of assessing particular aspects of a play, such as plot, character, pacing or motif, but as these writers found, there is only so much that can be explored under strict time constraints.

The best results are when a writer has the opportunity to do not just one, but a series of readings, and push the boundaries of the format.

These writers took a great deal from the North Wall week because through adding movement, post-show discussion and a versatile approach, they bridged the gap between traditional readings and the more fashionable work in progress format.

Requiring less commitment and funding than a *Scratch Night*, but being more challenging than a straight ‘sit and read’ event, this kind of reading is an extension of the development of a play, and holds great potential for the future of British new writing.