WildWorks is an art led international theatre company from Cornwall, founded in 2005 by Bill Mitchell to focus on site-specific events. WildWorkers are site-specific theatre makers – they create large scale spectacular productions and artworks that grow out of their locations, both inside and out: quarries, cliffs, derelict industrial sites, castles, empty department stores, shipyards, occupied zones. The work is developed alongside the people who belong to a place. A community is essential to the building of a narrative of site – by telling their stories and memories, and by contributing their skills and passions. The design process is firmly grounded on what the site offers – its topography, the traces that history has left upon it – and the narratives that people attach to the place.

Our work has taken us to many different locations. For the Make Believe exhibition Myriddin Wannell (Associate Designer) chose *The Passion* of Port Talbot whilst Bill Mitchell (Artistic Director) presented Kasteel Van Gaasbeek’s *Once Upon a Castle.* This two productions define the range of the work: *The Passion* was a massive scale event occupying an entire town and involving more than 1,000 community performers. It follows the strand of work that started with *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* and *Souterrain,* sited in locations and with communities often facing dramatic change – finding new purpose after the collapse of traditional industry, post-conflict, or on the brink of radical development.

*Once Upon a Castle* followed on from *Enchanted Palace (*Kensington Palace)transforming *Kasteel van Gaasbeek,* an important heritage site inBelgium, through design and performance. Although the projects are very different they both rely on the same set of principles. As a company we are drawn to stories that are both epic and intimate, human stories that can touch and resonate with audiences across barriers of language, age and nationality.

The WILDWORKS approach to place and community is distinctive.

The meaning of the work develops from research, from chance encounters,

from probing the feelings, thoughts, stories and memories of people. This is

the creative heartbeat, found by attending carefully to the place, the genius

loci, and working in a spirit of mutual hospitality with the people who inhabit

the physical space.

The Passion of Port Talbot (WILDWORKS and NATIONAL THEATRE WALES with Michael Sheen, 2011) was designed as a three-day non stop event that would take place over the entire town and its surroundings. We used the beach and promenade, the Civic square, a mountaintop overlooking the town, the shopping centre, motorway underpasses, a prison cell, cemeteries, a terrace of miner’s cottages, a working man’s club, a housing estate, a procession route along several miles of streets which culminated in a strangely fitting Golgotha set in the middle of a roundabout. For a year we had immersed ourselves in the life of the town, explored its spaces and non-places, got lost in a dérive punctuated by conversations that threw light into its troubled geography. The beach, a long stretch of sand and sea flanked on either side by the Babylon of smoke and lights of the steel works and chemical factory. The town straddled by the massive concrete infrastructure of the M4, its pillars cutting through residential streets, churchyards, green spaces; creating dead ends and darkened tunnels and strangely lopsided urban features.

The place posed questions which we explored in conversations with its inhabitants. What emerged was a tale of post industrial decay, brutal planning and enforced evictions to make way for the motorway. In one particular location an entire side of the street, made up of workers terraces, had been demolished, leaving the other side intact and inhabited. The evictions had not been forgotten and the remaining residents held strong memories of their neighbours and the vibrant community that once was. A man showed us a collection of home made films documenting the demolition of houses, pubs and shops and other significant buildings. The sense of loss was really palpable.

The story of The Passion is a story of occupation and insurgency. This translated into Port Talbot as a community besieged by corporations eager to force the people out of their houses and take control of the land. Myriddin’s design emerged out of this narrative. House doors, both as objects and as metaphors for the idea of home, became central to the design scheme: At the beginning of the show, when corporation members and their security forces arrive from the sea, a door appeared in the middle of the beach and the figure of the Stranger (based on John the Baptist) made his entrance through this unlikely, surreal threshold. At the end, the scaffold for the crucifixion is constructed out of the doors ripped out of homes to make the houses vulnerable and uninhabitable. The town was filled with makeshift camps, the people become refugees in their own home. Another element that became very important was the collections of personal photographs and home movies that had been brought to us by community members, documenting a way of life and a memory of place that was clearly mourned by the people of the town. This found material was projected, at the end of the show, onto a 15 meter tall water jet fanning behind the crucifixion, a hypnotic and spectacular finale commemorating the memory of the everyday, of disappeared neighbours and family members.

In Kasteel van Gaasbeek (Belgium 2014/15) the challenge was to transform 24 rooms through design and performance. Four designers were involved in creating  *Once Upon a Castle,* and it was Bill’s role to create the overall visual narrative and design the rooms that linked the narrative together.

Bill imagined the castle as a character, extending a warm welcome to visitors and making it clear it wants to communicate with them. Throughout the centuries both major and minor historical events had taken place here. The castle walls are steeped with them. What if the walls could talk? What if this ancient building was trying to remember how it all happened? There are many ways of understanding history and many paths to the interpretation of the traces left by human lives. Our way is to search for human emotion. Our treatment of history seeks a poetic vision that is grounded in documentation, but undergoes a series of transformations through visual art forms, performance, poetry, music, sound.

Once again we returned to our research methodology, starting with community and their emotional relationship to the place. Here the community was composed of the people who care for the castle: Curators, archivists, guides, gardeners, cleaners, admin staff. For several months we worked with the staff, their role to introduce us to the castle’s narratives and former inhabitants.

We asked our hosts to show us the castle. We asked for very specific tours: A tour of romance, A tour of violence, A tour of domesticity…

Our hosts, who would become the performers in *Once Upon a Castle*, acted as clever guides, and we witnessed the castle waking up. We explored its rooms from the cellars to the attics. We wandered its secret passages and its grand staircases. Our guides told us stories, anecdotes, showed us their favourite objects and rooms, deciphered the significance of the traces left by history. The most recent memory was that of the Marquesina Arconati Visconti, a hugely important figure in the history of Gaasbeek. But we could sense that there were deeper layers, that the castle’s memory went much further. The next step was to explore the castle’s extensive archives, covering 800 years of history. In the end we were captured by three characters: Lamoral, Count of Egmont, the 16th century hero; Paul Arconati Visconti, the Enlightenment visionary; and Marie Peyrat, Marquesina Arconati Visconti, the early 20th century collector and cultural patron. There were traces of their lives everywhere: boxes and boxes of correspondence, diaries and journals, maps, photographs (or, in the case of Egmont, contemporary cartoons of his execution). There were key discoveries that provided the foundations for *Once upon a Castle*. Finding the text of Egmont’s passionate last letter to his wife Sabine, and the cold, cynical correspondence between Philip II and the Duke of Alba after taking Egmont to the scaffold. Paul Arconati Visconti’s astounding notebook “Culture et Recettes” where he reveals himself as a practical visionary, his correspondence with world leaders proposing a plan for world peace and the densely hand-written journals where, at the end of his life, he begs a Higher Being for the salvation of his soul. Marie Peyrat’s extensive correspondence, lively and opinionated in her prime, and reflecting the sadness of her decline after the death of the love of her life. Working in the archives was like holding conversations with ghosts.

Bill’s vision, to give voice to the castle and bring its emotional memory to life, held the visual narrative together and ensured that all design elements cohered, transforming Gaasbeek into a kind of time machine where all times coexisted in the memory of the castle.

Taking part in the SBTD exhibition has been really important for the work that we do, which is hard to describe and harder to capture. Having the work included in a theatre design exhibition widens the definition of ‘theatre’ and what theatre designers do. The work escapes the conventional boundaries of the theatre space. It starts and it ends with place and people.

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Mercedes Kemp

WildWorks Associate Director – Research and Community