

# The Remembered Earth<sup>1</sup>

*Imagining Landscape through Community Theatre*

**By Gill Horitz**



Photo: © Gill Horitz

*The sun grew lower over the river landscape, illuminating views of the town none of us had seen before. Over four beautiful evenings in early July, three hundred audience members and performers of all ages made their way through a series of fields beside the river Stour in Wimborne, as part of a community theatre performance, Secrets of the Stour. The first time in centuries local people were permitted to walk that stretch of river. The fields, now part of the Dean's Court Estate, owned by Sir William Hanham, were once church lands which, in 1548, John Hanham, Sir William Hanham's ancestor, was appointed to seize during the 'dissolution of the monasteries'. From a new angle we saw the familiar Minster towers and turrets of the C15 Queen Elizabeth school come into view. As the audience were led through portals of woven leaves and along specially shaped paths cut in fields of tall grasses, the light grew ever more vivid against lengthening shadows of hedge rows and ancient oaks. Alongside the meadow fields, the river curved onwards. Swans, herons, kingfishers appeared in their own time becoming part of the play's experience.*



*Secrets of the Stour* was the culmination of two years research by Wimborne Community Theatre

about the ecology and social history of Wimborne's two rivers, Allen and Stour. Children and adults contributed stories and memories, songs and poems, focusing on what living and playing near these rivers means to people's lives. Several people spoke about the river 'weaving through their lives', and someone else commented,

*When you grow up in a landscape with a river, the water seems to wend its way through your memories like lines curving over the contours of a map<sup>2</sup>.*

For some, the river is a place to visit to overcome personal turbulence or to seek stillness of mind in a view of ever moving waters. One young person wrote:

*It was a hot summer's day, one of the saddest for me and my family because it was my Grandad's funeral and my mind was full of emotions, so I went for a walk with my brother, mum, dad and my nan. Hearing and seeing the birds chirp in harmony reminded me of my Grandad because birds were his favourite animal*



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Photo: Unknown photographer

*and it really felt like he was there with us. Walking around the Stour River made me happier and want to talk a lot more. . .*<sup>3</sup>

Another said:

*The waterway becomes a seasonal barometer. And when that river is as prone to flooding as the Allen, you are continually aware of the water which ebbs and flows and swells and dips as the weather makes its sometimes sleepy, sometimes turbulent, journey through the calendar.*<sup>4</sup>

Students at the local secondary school spoke about going down to the river during the Covid pandemic, through the fields and down to the river to ease their anxiety. Others preferred the solitude of their own rooms and the safe adventuring of internet gaming. Dark and light aspects of the river's presence were conveyed: drownings, salvation, fear, solace, the river's power and vulnerability mirrored by our own, and something else we, as a group, considered for the first time, the idea of interconnectedness, of how the 'rivers flow not past, but through us'<sup>5</sup>.

Drawing on the oral research, a story emerged of two very differently natured siblings, Sam and Jay, who are prompted in a time of grief to set out on a journey

of self-discovery and adventure.

The idea that children and adults would follow a travelling play through his fields delighted Sir William Hanham; here was an idea that chimed with his own ambitions to raise awareness of the value of the rivers for both community and for the wildlife.

*With both the Allen and the Stour running through the Deans Court Estate, we are starting to regenerate the land to bring it back into balance with nature, and we hope to engage with schools and community organisations to participate in this endeavour*<sup>6</sup>.

WCT's thirtieth anniversary of producing site-specific community theatre in East Dorset, made us turn our minds back to the first production in 1991 of *Voyages*, set in another once privately-owned landscape, the Bankes' family estate of Kingston Lacy.

The story was created through a process WCT members have employed with each subsequent production. As well as researching local stories and historical events relevant to that landscape, time was spent in the grounds of Kingston Lacy, wandering/ wondering while observing the lie of

the land. Students from the schools involved also worked on site with environmental artists, collecting and using natural materials. And the story that evolved could only be told and made sense of by audience members walking where the story was formed, about characters who once lived there. With the exemplary support of National Trust employees living at the House (as distinct from the National Trust at a national level), the *Voyages* production enabled hundreds of people to walk in the estate, following the fictitious journey of the Bankes' youngest daughter, Viola, and her nursery maid, Alice Maude Baker, as they escaped preparations for the arrival of King Edward VII; running through the grounds, leaping the ha-ha, travelling backwards and forwards through time. The National Trust took over the stewardship of the Bankes' land in 1982, bequeathed to them by Sir Ralph Bankes. In 2006 we began researching for another play set on the Bankes' estate. *The Lie of the Land* took place in and around the village of Pamphill; we began the process by inviting people in the village to a meeting. In a friendly



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circle around an old map of the area, they pointed out places, recalling memories and stories, their own as well as family stories. Some people still remembered the Squire calling at their cottages and were keen to voice views about the merits of landlords, private and public.

*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder,*

wrote Joseph Campbell, describing the narrative pattern of the Hero's Journey. Like Alice Maude Baker, the two young siblings, Jay and Sam, in WCT's 2022 production, *Secrets of the Stour*, venture into the landscape to solve and resolve particular fears and grief and the audience travel the course with them.

The play began with a commemorative event celebrating the life of their recently deceased Granddad, and it is a toast to his memory which audience and cast make, that becomes the catalyst for the arrival on the riverbank of a mysterious boatman (spirit of Granddad) accompanied by Spirit Guides, protectors of the otter, water crowfoot, caddisfly, eel, salmon and kingfisher, each represented by totemic puppets taking on their forms.

*Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience; to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, to dwell upon it. . . He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind.'*<sup>7</sup>

One grandchild finds such imaginings hard to fathom while the other is willing to listen and be led even where there is uncertainty. The audience follow, through portals of overhanging trees and golden fields of meadow grass, to arrive in a clearing where

Shrines are placed, each dedicated to the four compass points and crowned by puppets representing one of each creature or plant living in the field: water crowfoot, frog, heron and mayfly.

The audience divided into four groups move from Shrine to Shrine in a quasi-game show format. Discoveries about the creatures' lives are made along the way. Inside each shrine, an extract from Granddad's diary is found which an audience member reads aloud to the rest of the group. Each extract reveals some aspect of Granddad's knowledge of and concerns for nature. He records signs for concern, low water levels due to dry winters and lack of summer rain, so no flooding occurs on the water meadows and consequently, no nutrients benefit the species that depend on the floods for their ecology. He wanted his grandchildren to recognise this interdependence, to help find ways to rebuild the river ecosystem.

Once the four diary extracts have been read, the connection between the different shrines becomes clear – each represent the life cycle connecting species, vulnerable and under threat – and Jay realises he and his sister have a part to play, by learning the names of creatures and plants, by imagining the ancient oak as a mother tree messaging the younger trees, by finding out the mayfly eats the plant, and the frog eats the mayfly.

The process we have adopted for making community theatre involves members of the group 'inhabiting' the chosen place to give it their full attention; we spend a lot of time exploring until the space becomes one carved out of our own lives as well as the space within a field, forest or building. Our aim is to make

theatre that is neither history play nor environmental documentary but a hybrid, a ritual immersion in landscape, an intervention.

Devising the 2004 production, *By Hook or By Crook*, set in Holt Forest, we began by asking ourselves the questions: what is the value of woods, who or what are they for? We asked people living in or near the Forest the same question; they told us about walking, being lost, playing, land art shrines appearing mysteriously, atmospheres, local characters, as well as moments when national and local politics affect the lives of a community. The fate of young villager, Amy Farrant, when her path crossed that of the Duke of Monmouth in Holt parish, or more contemporary concerns: to what extent should the forest be managed by English Nature (now Natural England), how freely should horses be ridden on paths, should grazing be reintroduced, to what extent should woods be promoted as a place for dog walkers?

Something of all that was distilled within the devising process and became part of the final script.

*This play was a way of documenting the knowledge that is still, just – there in peoples' minds. Such a lot is being lost as a generation takes this knowledge to their graves. This knowledge is vital if the forest is to 'live' and not just become a 'rustic theme park'.<sup>8</sup>*

Working with English Nature was crucial in how the play was devised and set within the wood. The abundance of dark holly trees meant there were few open areas to perform in or to place the sculpted pieces made by an environmental artist. English Nature enthusiastically brought forward a plan for clearing some of the holly trees, which opened up clearings and



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let in light; before many weeks had passed, grass emerged followed by wildflowers growing on the woodland floor. One morning, a buzzard flew low through the newly opened space.

In all the landscapes we have made theatre: Kingston Lacy, White Mill, Hod Hill, Holt Forest, Pamphill, Wimborne Minster, the Minster Green, BytheWay Field, Wimborne's Pump House and, most recently, the rivers Allen and Stour, we found that by spending time in those places to explore and imagine, as Ralph Waldo Emerson described,

*the ground is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered with hints. . .*

Something in us longs to reveal what is unseen and past, as well as to know what is taking place and happening here and now. By delving, we become part of a place's history and ecology as well as our own, we become part of the change that is taking place there.

At the finale of *Secrets of the Stour*, the audience were led around a small round hillock (possibly a Norman motte<sup>9</sup>) to watch the last moments of the story played out on the riverbank.

Sam and Jay recognised the spirit of their Granddad in the place he loved; here, he said, they will feel close to him. The audience with Sam and Jay watched as he stepped into the waiting boat and the mysterious boatman rowed him upstream, gradually disappearing round the bend in the river, as the choir sang,

*The river is flowing, flowing and growing...the river is flowing down to the sea. Mother Earth, carry me, your child I will always be. Mother Earth, carry me down to the sea.*

Then the audience were guided back by a different route, walking a path closer to the river, hearing from the undergrowth recorded sounds:

invertebrates living in the river, sounds inside the river, people talking about its habits and temperaments, a song, a poem, someone's memory. People slowed, pausing to listen.

Can this kind of landscape theatre that 'situates human experience within a larger ecological story (not above it)<sup>11</sup>', be a form of advocacy for understanding, even reconnecting, with nature's ecosystems?

*The way the performance moved through the landscape was also so well planned, capturing the beauty of the location whilst also reinforcing the need to protect it.*<sup>12</sup>

Will this cultural form help people reconnect with the wider ecosystems we depend on yet are damaging, as author, Richard Powers, hopes his own books, *Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, might achieve, 'when so much that is meaningful in life risks being lost'. ■

## About Wimborne Community Theatre

Wimborne Community Theatre creates original site-specific performances, set in unusual outdoor venues or non-theatre buildings inspired by local places and the lives of inhabitants, past and present, real and fictional. WCT has created over 25 productions since 1991. [www.wimbornecommunitytheatre.co.uk](http://www.wimbornecommunitytheatre.co.uk) (new website about to be launched)

## Who took part in helping to create *Secrets of the Stour*?:

The Team:

Over 100 adults and children participated in the show, as actors, production, artists and volunteers.

Schools involved:

Allenbourn Middle School, Wimborne, Dorset  
Rushcombe First School, Corfe Mullen,

Dorset. Tony Horitz worked with the school earlier in the year on a learning adventure focused on the Environment (using Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* as a base text). Year 4s with their teachers Alex Hardy and Rachel Sutcliffe produced a wonderful song and dance in praise of nature, which they performed to great acclaim as part of *Secrets of the Stour*.

The following artists & practitioners worked with WCT to create *Secrets of the Stour*:  
Artistic Director (Wimborne Community Theatre), Tony Horitz; <https://stateofplayarts.co.uk>  
Guest Artistic Director, Joe Hancock; (Burn the Curtain) [www.burnthecurtaintheatre.com](http://www.burnthecurtaintheatre.com)  
Millstream Theatre Artistic Director, Tam Gilbert [www.facebook.com/MillstreamTheatre/](http://www.facebook.com/MillstreamTheatre/)  
Composed and Musical Director, Karen Wimhurst [www.karenwimhurst.co.uk](http://www.karenwimhurst.co.uk);  
Sound artists, Adrian Newton <http://nemeton.org.uk> and Harry Ovington [www.sonicwild.co.uk](http://www.sonicwild.co.uk)  
Visual Artist, Heidi Steller, <http://www.heidisteller.co.uk>

## References

1. N Scott Momaday
2. Student, St Michael's School
3. Student, St Michael's School
4. Stephanie Robertson
5. John Muir, naturalist and conservationist
6. Sir William Hanham
7. N Scott Momaday
8. Audience member, Holt Forest - *By Hook or by Crook* Historic England Research Records
9. Native American Folk song
10. Richard Powers
11. Gavin White, Deputy Headteacher,
12. Rushcombe School, Corfe Mullen



**Gill Horitz** lives in Dorset and has worked in the Arts for many years, developing creative projects with children and adults in many different settings. She co-founded Wimborne Community Theatre in 1991, which collaborates with professional artists and theatre-makers to develop local stories in non-theatre spaces. Her poetry and other writing has been published in various magazines and anthologies. Her poetry pamphlet *All the different darknesses* was published by Cinnamon Press in 2018.