

I've done a lot of lecturing.

Well. Talking.

I've talked to journalism students, I've talked to film production students, I've talked to people who want to be radio presenters.

I talk on the radio quite a lot.

I've even talked to Women's Institutes and Rotary clubs.

Once, I accidentally talked to a classroom full of police officers while in the line of a duty as a local newspaper reporter.

When I say accidentally, I mean in the literal sense - an accident being an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly. I'll come back to that.

But this is something of a first.

Lecturing at this festival about this particular subject.

Thank you for being here at the special moment when a journalist, writer and broadcaster becomes a man. That is to say, a bona fide, Ilkley Lit Fest lecturer.

First I have to say thank you to the Walter Swann Trust for asking me to deliver this inaugural lecture. A genuine privilege to honour a really good man and one who I know meant a lot to this community. He meant a lot to this beautiful town.

Actually, I should say this beautiful, somewhat gentrified, Yorkshire town.

Because that is, after a fashion, going to be the subject of this lecture. Me, standing here, in this beautiful, somewhat gentrified, Yorkshire town, talking about theatre.

When preparing for tonight, I read that you should give your lecture a title.

So the inaugural Walter Swan lecture is called: Gentrification, storming the Castle and Accidentally Lecturing a Classroom Full of Police Officers.

Walter, I'm told - I did know him but I don't want to be presumptuous while surrounded by I'm sure, many of his friends - I'm told believed in the thing that is at the core of my beliefs when it comes to theatre and the thrust of what I'll be discussing tonight.

That is the belief that theatre really is for everyone. Everyone. It always has been and it should be. We've lost sight of that vital belief.

That, by the way, is what this lecture is really going to be about.

But I like the title Gentrification, Storming the Castle and Accidentally Lecturing a Classroom Full of Police Officers. So we'll stick with that.

There were two moments in my childhood that scarred my heart and left an indelible mark when it comes to theatre.

I'm going to tell you about both.

The first, I remember so vividly, that I recall it like it was yesterday, so I'm going to tell you the story in the present tense.

I'm seven, maybe eight. Possibly nine. I'm definitely still at primary school - I remember the feelings more than the details.

I'm sitting in the Alhambra theatre. It's not the first time I've been in this theatre. I remember my mum and dad bringing me and my brother here. I remember trying to catch a chocolate bar thrown from the stage by that titan of theatre Russ Abbott. I also remember throwing a foam brick as hard as I could at the stage at Russ. He started it. I'm at what I know as 'panto' and it appears to be a mayhem filled, chaotic couple of hours in a theatre, all led by clown in chief Russ Abbott. You might say that the theatre was turned into Russ Abbott's Madhouse.

Something for the teenagers there.

This time, though, tonight in the theatre, the beautiful Bradford Alhambra, there is no Russ Abbott, there are no foam bricks, there is just a story on stage. A breathing, real, living story.

The story is old. It was written by a fairly extremist Christian teacher several decades earlier, but it's alive, now, because it is being performed in front of me, by real life actors.

We're in the same room, the actors, me, the rest of the audience, and I feel like my parents really ought to get some of the ticket money refunded because I'm only actually using the edge of my seat.

The RSC, not that I know it, is the theatre company responsible for holding my eight, or seven or nine-year-old self, whichever it was, completely rapt by this incredible story.

I don't know it's the RSC, I barely grasp what it means that I'm at a theatre in Bradford, all I really know is that the story on the stage has a vice-like grip around my heart.

I'm watching the story, I'm mesmerised and then something extraordinary happens. Before I share the extraordinary thing, I have to step out briefly from the story to explain something. I started radio presenting around three years ago and it was only when I started doing that, that I discovered that I have quite a strong accent. My Keighley edges were smoothed by a grammar school education and a university in the south, but when it comes to words anchored by the vowels O and A, my Keighley rougher edges resurface.

So, back to the story. I'm seven, eight, nine, whatever it was, the detail isn't important, and I'm in the Alhambra and on to the stage sails a boat - yes, a boat. That was the reason for the accent warning by the by, I discovered the word boat is one where my accent really bursts forth.

So there I am, edge of my seat, completely held by the story and on to the stage comes a boat.

If I were relating this story as movie, this would be the moment we'd cut to fireworks and the mushroom cloud of a bomb going off to attempt to capture what had happened in my head.

Magic.

Real, actual magic just happened in front of me.

I kind of grasp, just about, what the actors are doing - they're pretending to be characters in the story. They're telling the story.

But this? A boat?

This is pure magic.

And that, was where it began for me.

I suppose really, reflecting on that, I ought to have become a theatre designer. I didn't, I became a writer with the hope that I might recreate that magic that moved me so much, for someone else.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The boat. The magic, the theatre.

If this strange, magical thing was theatre, than give me excess of it, but not so that the appetite may sicken, as Orsino wished for in music, but swell so I would only ever want more of it.

As you can tell, the child version of me was from that moment on a convert to the world of theatre.

And then... I didn't go again.

My house was a house where the newspaper was the Daily Star. My house was a house where the parents of the four children had both left school at 15.

My house was a house where trips to the theatre were simply not on the radar.

Fortunately at St Anne's School in Keighley there was an inspirational teacher called Mrs Goodridge. Years later I discovered this guardian angel had a first name.

Catherine Goodridge just doesn't sound right.

Years after that magical moment, Mrs Goodridge took me to my second ever theatre trip - second ever not involving Russ Abbott - before my primary school days were out.

This was the big one.

The magic of the boat on which the Pevensie children sailed was special, but this second trip was another level of magic entirely.

I don't remember the details quite so well.

I do remember when I was at school that I had a crush on a particular girl pretty much from year one of primary school. I didn't understand my feelings, but I saw them reflected back at me that second night at the theatre, when, as a ten year old, I was taken by Mrs Goodridge to see Romeo and Juliet.

This wasn't just any performance. This was a promenade performance in an old warehouse type building. I've tried in vain to find the details of this production, so all I can tell you is what I remember.

It was in a warehouse or a factory possibly in Leeds, maybe in Bradford. It was performed in various stages around the factory. It was dirty and visceral. And I understood very little of the language.

I understood entirely how it made me feel. It made my heart ache, it made me think of the girl I'd had a crush on for six or seven years by that point - and by the by, if you're expecting a happy ending to that story, there isn't one - I think the girl may be dimly aware of my existence, but of the impact she had on me, she remains ignorant - but this play by this long dead white guy did something amazing, it told me something about my soul.

That really was it.

The magical boat was the start of a romance, Romeo and Juliet was the moment it became something much more real. This was now a lifelong love.

Theatre means a lot to me. There is one other story that I'm going to tell you about a theatre experience, but I want to reflect on why the CS Lewis inspired boat and the rough and dirty Romeo and Juliet are so important.

We're allowed something insidious to happen to the way we access theatre.

I'm sure that schools still organise trips to theatres, but I wonder just how widespread those trips are. I wonder if a working class kid in Keighley will have the opportunity to have experiences comparable to those two special experiences I had at an impressionable age?

The theatre producer David Pugh, the man who is behind the musical *The Girls*, written by Tim Firth and Gary Barlow coming to Leeds Grand Theatre next month, told me a couple of months ago that he increasingly sees actors who are rich and privileged, performing to audiences who are rich and privileged.

It was a pure accident of fate that I ended up in a class with Mrs Goodridge. What if I hadn't have been that lucky? What if I didn't land lucky in a class with a teacher led by someone who was willing to spend her own time taking children to the theatre? What if we relied on the passion of people like her to introduce people like me to one of the oldest art forms we have?

I'll tell you one thing that is for damn sure - i wouldn't have become the Yorkshire Post arts editor, I wouldn't be a theatre critic and I wouldn't have a career as a writer today. But wider than that, because this isn't actually just about me, everyone should have the opportunity to see if theatre is a world for them. Every child - not just those who have parents who go to theatre - should be given access to that world. Access to a world that can open up places in your heart and mind like nothing else can.

As the government slices away, with a chainsaw powered by pure ideology at arts funding, we are pushing theatre further and further out of the reach of those who can't afford it.

That's not okay. It is simply not right.

The gentrification of theatre is an abhorrent and appalling act of vandalism and it is a vandalism committed against those in society less able to repair the damage created by that vandalism.

Take away the funding for theatre and the privileged few will be able to pay for the expensive tickets so their children can gain access to a world populated by Shakespeare and the Royal Shakespeare Company, but the poorer end of society will be left behind.

So what?

In 1956 John Osborne created a seismic shift in theatre when he put an ironing board on the stage of the Royal Court.

Before then theatre in Britain was stagnant. Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan ruled the roost with drawing room plays, telling the stories of the foibles of the middle and upper classes.

I've seen some of those plays. They're...fine.

Look Back in Anger, the stone that Osborne threw into the completely still pool of British theatre heralded a wave of writers telling the stories of the worlds they knew. British theatre was revitalised and enriched overnight.

We have writers today who continue the tradition. Mark Catley, Alice Nutter, Mark Ravenhill, these are writers who are telling us stories of the non-monied classes. We want a varied diet in our theatre menu, don't we? We don't want to be taken back to the drawing room?

In the world of television, where I migrated a couple of years ago, writers like Paul Abbott tell stories that are real, raw and visceral. Shameless can only be written if it has been lived.

So, gentrification is one of the most dangerous challenges the theatre world faces. Not only do we shirk our moral responsibility in allowing it to happen, we consign ourselves to a world of watching myopic stories on our stages. I don't want that.

I want people with a range of stories, from a range of backgrounds writing their stories for the stage. Doesn't everyone want that?

The title of this lecture is Gentrification, storming the Castle and Accidentally Lecturing a Classroom Full of Police Officers.

I've dealt with gentrification and the insidious creeping of it over our theatre industries.

I'm going to talk about storming the castle, but I should probably now deal with the most obtuse part of that title.

I'm in Wiltshire. I have a Theology degree and I have somehow ended up working as a journalist. Even though I started my career in the late nineties, working for a local paper in Wiltshire was, I believe, like being a journalist in the 1950s. Wiltshire is not lively. Devizes is its least lively place.

I worked in Devizes. I had to find stories to fill the Devizes pages of the Wiltshire Gazette and Herald.

The bread and butter for filling the pages of the Wiltshire Gazette and Herald comes from parish council meetings. It comes from calls to the local bobbies and it comes - I am not making this up - once from standing by a sinkhole in a field for eight hours watching a dozen firefighters free a lamb from that sinkhole.

It made a great front page picture.

So, I'm a cub reporter in the 1950s slash Wiltshire and I am learning my trade and I receive one of those bread and butter stories - the local police are spending the week at a local primary school and I am despatched to do an interview.

Regular. Normal. Perfectly ordinary story.

I arrive at the school and I'm met by a police officer.

She's lovely, I'm keen, eager, ready with my notebook and she tells me she's going to show me up to the classroom.

I'm thinking she's probably lined up some pupils to chat with too.

I walk into the classroom and I have one of those moments where you feel like you're wearing blinkers on a waltzer. Everything's spinning and you can't take in the whole scene.

Snapshots.

I see a classroom full of police officers sitting behind school desks laid out in a horseshoe. There are about 30 of them.

I look at the police officer who has lured me into this trap. She's smiling. A smiling assassin.

I look at the blackboard - they had blackboards and i read: Working with the local media, a Talk by Nick Ahad.

Pause and drink.

I look back at the classroom.

30 police officers.

I freeze.

If this were a movie, the sound would be all distorted, as though recorded underwater. I hear little bits of what the police officer is saying.

Nick Ahad...local journalist...talk for the next 45 minutes...how we can work together.

Cut to.

45 minutes later, a 21 year old journalist in an ill-fitting suit is sweating. The audience watching him have no idea just how tight his buttocks are. He's just blagged his way through 45 minutes of a talk to classroom full of police officer.

The reason I share this story with you, apart from the fact that I appreciate now, 17 years on, that it is actually quite entertaining, is that something serious occurs about that afternoon.

There were a couple of reasons I was equipped to blag my way - and I really was blagging my way - through that 45 minutes.

There's the fact that I was a waiter at my dad's restaurant, the fact that I worked in a Keighley fish and chip shop with my nanna, the fact that my grandad was a landlord and we grew up in a cornershop.

But the two main reasons I was able to stand in front of that classroom and talk my way out of 45 minutes of potential terror are something I discovered this week, i share with Walter.

The first, is theatre.

After the deep love had been established by The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe and later Romeo and Juliet, I started acting. And I didn't really stop. My first part was

the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland - I'm late, I'm late, I'm oh so very late, for wasting time she thinks a crime I'll meet a shocking fate I was ten. Still got it.

I was then variously in Oliver, Midsummer Night's Dream, Twelfth Night, some enormously pretentious nonsense in my first year at university, Luigi Pirandello's *Così è se vi pare*.

That was reason number one I was able to stand in front of a classroom of thirty police officers - actually, shall we go to 40? Why not, no-one here was there...and exaggeration never harmed a story.

That's why I was able to stand in a classroom of 50 police officers and talk for 45 minutes. Theatre.

I happen to know I might have been able to do that without my background in theatre, had I been from the kind of family in which the parents were doctors, teachers, lawyers.

How do I know that?

Because of something myself and Walter had in common.

We were both grammar school boys.

I owe my journey into grammar school to - here's that guardian angel again - Mrs Goodridge.

Walter to a tricky childhood. After attending seven different primary schools, he passed the eleven plus and was lucky enough to get into Colchester Royal Grammar School. That education might have come to an end, through family difficulties, were it not for the school stepping in and helping make it possible for Walter to become a boarder at the school. Walter had his own guardian angel in the shape of a teacher who encouraged him to write and perform and act.

Children like me and Walter, who come from backgrounds with parents who can't buy the right to give their kids the keys to the kingdom shouldn't be left by the way side.

I witnessed first hand those grammar school boys who could easily have walked into that room of 100 police officers and delivered a 45 minute talk about the police force and the local media working together, but I had parents who were working too long and too hard to be able to sit down and tell me over dinner how the world really works.

Theatre gave me a confidence to be able to get up on a stage, a confidence to stand in front of those 100 police officers.

I'm not claiming that theatre is some kind of magic wand, all I'm saying is that it gave Walter, a teenage boy from a tricky family background, a purpose. It gave me, a mixed race boy growing up poor in a poor part of Keighley, a voice.

Maybe it's not a magic wand, but it does hold some kind of magic if it can do that.

The more barriers we put in place, the more arts funding cuts pull up the drawbridge, the fewer the opportunities for people like me and Walter to find our voices.

So, let's storm the castle.

I am biased. I was the arts editor of the Yorkshire Post for ten years, I have developed work with the brilliant Bradford based theatre in the mill and I'm really hoping before too long the West Yorkshire Playhouse will commission one of my plays - but I do believe that Yorkshire has the strongest regional theatre in the UK outside of London.

The truth is, some of our theatres and some theatre companies have made their castles impermeable. It's human nature for us to protect our own fiefdoms.

In recent years I've seen a change. There are companies like Slung Low, Freedom Studios trying to find the people who were where I was two decades ago and give them a voice. The West Yorkshire Playhouse, under the watch of James Brining, appears to be paying more than lip service to the fact that the building wants to see new voices. The Sheffield Crucible has a people's theatre, Cast in Doncaster is now being led by an impressive asian woman Kully Thiari and York Theatre Royal is turning community engagement into an art form.

But we have to remember that we're only taking small steps down the path to a genuinely egalitarian and democratic type of theatre.

As I stand, a lad from Keighley, in the beautiful, slightly genteel market town of Ilkley, I say it's up to us to recognise the privilege we have - whether we were born to it or whether we met guardian angels along the way who granted it - and make sure we either leave the ladders down or give people a helping hand.

And if I was giving this lecture in an inner city school in Bradford I would telling people to storm the castle.

We own the castles.

We pay for the Playhouse, we pay for the Crucible. We own those castles. They are ours. And we deserve to be there.

It was about seven years ago now that i started to scratch an itch that wouldn't go away. I love being a journalist, I love the job I get to do, but seven years ago I realised that I had more to say than my journalism would allow.

I went to the Playhouse and took part in SYWTBAW.

17. I wasn't one of the seventeen. Embarrassing. Went to Peshkar. Got commissioned. I'm not exceptional. I had a mother who used to take me with her when she was cleaning pub toilets. I know that anything worth having is not easily won.

I then went to Bradford Theatre in the Mill and asked if they would let me write a play, because the other people in Yorkshire theatre didn't seem to want to play with me.

Let me be part of their game.

So I made my own rules.

I decided to storm the castle.

We have to empower more people to know that if the people who are playing in the castle won't let them join in, then they have to make their own rules, start their own game and, if necessary, storm the castle. Or perhaps even build their own.

That's why this lecture was called Gentrification, storming the Castle and
Accidentally Lecturing a Classroom Full of Police Officers.

I want to share one last thing that happened to me, two decades after I first
witnessed magic at the Alhambra theatre.

I'm back at the Alhambra, now I'm there as a professional theatre critic, writing for
the newspaper that I used to get the bus past when I was a kid.

I'm watching one of my favourite plays of the last decade.

Alan Bennett's History Boys.

The play, about a group of a bright young students in Sheffield hoping to pass their
entrance exam to Oxbridge, is already a huge hit. I was there at the National Theatre
the night the play opened. And here I am in Bradford, watching the play's first tour.

I could spend a long time talking about the merits of this amazing piece of work. It's
been turned into a movie and if you've never seen either the stage version or the
movie, please don't see the movie. Wait for the stage version to come around again.

That's where it really lives and breathes.

I'm not going to spend a long time talking about how brilliant a piece of work I think
The History Boys is, I'm just going to tell you about a single magical moment that
happened in the play.

Hector is a pederast. The genius of Bennett is that he makes us love Hector, the
pederast who touches his male students in appropriately by turning him into a
guardian angel, a la Mrs Goodridge.

His young charges love Hector.

He's talking to Posner, who I like to think of as the hero of the story.

Posner can be summed up neatly with one of the line's Bennett gives him: "I'm a Jew,
I'm small, I'm homosexual and I live in Sheffield. I'm fucked."

And Bennett has Posner sit down with Hector, they're discussing a poem.

And Hector says:

The best moments in reading are when you come across something - a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things - that you'd thought special, particular to you. And here it is, set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead. And it's as if a hand has come out, and taken yours.

And as I watch that scene play out between Hector and Posner, it feels like the walls of the Alhambra are closing in. It feels like I have a telescope through which I am watching the action.

Everyone else around me has disappeared. I can't see anything or anyone, other than Hector and Posner and those words are doing something extraordinary to my heart.

I'm in love, and I'm delirious and I'm scared and I realise that I am a small, insignificant speck of dust on this spinning planet and at the same time I'm connected to everything. And theatre did that.

Doesn't everyone deserve the chance to feel like that?

I think so.