**Exploring Sir Galahad’s Quest: A Journey to Dream Bigger Dreams**

A creative collaboration between The Centre for Arthurian Studies at Bangor University and Writer/Theatre Practititioner, Gillian Brownson.

*By Professor Raluca Radulescu & Gillian Brownson*

**Background**

When Education Minister, Huw Ellis, said that the findings in Professor Graham Donaldson’s 2015 report, ‘Successful Futures,’ were “compelling, exciting and ambitious,” the words could be no better applied to the buzz of creativity taking place throughout schools in Wales since. Donaldson suggested early in his report that “The high degree of prescription in the national curriculum…has tended to create a culture within which the creative role of the school has become diminished,” and makes many recommendations towards rectifying this often-ugly truth. As a result, an army of Wales’ many and talented Arts Practitioners have rallied around Donaldson’s quest, to crown Creativity as King, and place it squarely at the centre of Wales’ education system. 2018 was an exceptionally exciting time to be an Artist working in Welsh schools, as this shift encompasses ‘Experience’ as well as ‘Learning’, with an aim for Expressive Arts to underpin and work cohesively with all other key areas of education.

At the same time as the Donaldson Developments, Raluca Radulescu, Professor of Medieval Literature at Bangor University, was founding and opening the Centre for Arthurian Studies at the University, bringing together the legacy and experience of more than 100 years of Arthurian scholarship, teaching and engagement, now grounded further in a vision to open up the rare books and manuscripts in the holdings of the Centre (part of the Bangor University Library, Archives and Special Collections) to make them accessible resources for a much broader audience than university staff and students. The launch of the Centre in January 2017 coincided with the start of the Year of Legends in Wales, and marked the Centre’s commitment to provide not only invaluable opportunities for research and exchange to local and international scholars and students, but also to raise aspirations in the community, building on two large-scale events that had already taken place in 2015 (a ‘King Arthur Family Fun Day’ at Bangor University Library, attended by over one hundred from the local community, staff and students; and a ‘Medieval Arthurian Fun Day’ at Caernarfon Castle, attended by over five hundred local primary school children and their teachers – which led to widespread implementation of the model in CADW sites across Wales). Prof. Radulescu had already taught generations of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (the latter on the unique MA in Arthurian Literature ran by Bangor University) and developed her collaborative teaching of Children’s literature in the new module (unique in the UK) ‘Children’s Fictions’, co-taught with published creative writer Dr Lisa Blower, at Bangor University, a module that includes fairy tale, myth and legend as the foundation stories that shape children’s early days and education.

It was Professor Radulescu’s vision for the Centre for Arthurian Studies that lit a spark of interest for Welsh Theatre Practitioner and Writer, Gillian Brownson, who had been practicing widely as a Storyteller, throughout 2017. If the magnificent resources at the Centre were to become available to school pupils, offering experiences beyond the classroom walls, what power might they hold? Bangor University already had a programme for Creative Practitioners in Residence to work with academic specialists to develop community-focused programmes (the ESRC Bangor Impact Accelleration Account scheme), so the opportunity presented itself for Prof. Radulescu and Ms Brownson to develop plans they had only been able to talk about in principle since 2017. They would work together on a new creative venture inspired by both Prof. Radulescu’s scholarship on the Grail quest and its potential to inspire young people today – which would be a key area in Gillian Brownson’s planning. Together they developed a programme designed to enthuse both pupils and their teachers to learn more about the hidden mystery of the legendary Holy Grail and inspire a love of stories that might stay with the pupils as they entered their programme of study for their GCSE in English.

More specifically, Prof. Radulescu’s main aim was to expand the educational reach of her research beyond higher education into the secondary school learning arena, where the themes of the Arthurian Quest - aspiration, fellowship, making good choices and problem solving, could all be understood, felt and lived. Prof. Radulescu and Gillian Brownson, with the input of MPhil student in creative studies and media Kate Stuart, hoped they could ‘breathe new life into the Grail stories’, using the Story’s themes to underpin a very real exploration of the pupils’ own aspirations, relationships, choice making and problem solving, all of which might serve to give them the confidence to create their own quest stories.

**The Project**

Ysgol Aberconwy, which sits just outside the walls of Conwy in North Wales, was where the programme found its willing Questers. Literacy Development Co-ordinator and Assistant Head Teacher, Richard Burrows, identified a group of Year 7 Students who had somewhat disengaged with Writing, Stories & Literature.

With the constant aim to raise aspirations generally in the group, and the goal to re-engage the young people with story, Gillian Brownson and Prof. Radulescu designed an eight-week workshop & performance programme centred around Sir Galahad and his journey of self-discovery, while Kate Stuart facilitated digital activities using the StoryMap app. Professor Radulescu also brought the students into the Centre for Arthurian Studies, where the students were not only able to freely enter a University as active learners, but also were to be invited into the sacred world of ancient manuscripts and were privvy to Professor Radulescu’s research.

The project had four component parts:

*Week 1 - 3*

From the very start, Ms Brownson likened the quest the group were on to Sir Galahad’s very own. She introduced a Motto, a mantra for growth mindset, that was ‘performed’ every week with a call & response ritual, which sought to galvanise the group over time, and foster a collaborative culture:

Bang our Drum,

Raise our swords!

This is our Quest.

To be the Best!

The group reflected on and shared who they were, their stories, by designing their own heraldic shield and placing it on their very own Round Table. Sitting comfortably on beanbags, they watched film clips with Gillain Brownson and Prof Radulescu and discussed their knowledge of the Quest story, the Round Table, and the Sword in the Stone mission. They went outside, and explored Galahad’s story physically, expressively, while enjoying the sunlight. They went to Bangor University, in the Harry Potter like Shankland room of the Library, to find their way to the Arthurian rare books in all thier glory and to be part of a live performance, where Gillian Brownson told the Galahad story in the oral tradition, in full costume – the Storyteller’s chair in role as the Siege Perilous – where pupils were invited to sit, should they dare.

*Week 4-5*

At this stage the pupils were inspired by watching and discussing a National Geographic TV channel documentary, the ‘Sword in the Stone’, produced as a result Prof. Radulescu’s research and presented by her (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-XX3vKxQo8&feature=youtu.be>), from which they learned that Grail quests expanded across Europe and thus well beyond the world of medieval Arthurian knights. Through activities centred on the role of retelling old stories in a modern form, run by Prof. Radulescu, the pupils and their teachers developed their understanding of the importance of new versions of the Quest, tailored to new audiences. After developing an appreciation for Sir Galahad’s particular tale, and an understanding of his personal goals in the story, the students were challenged to create their own heroes, who would go on their own journey in search of their own Grail. Writing stories traditionally, for this group, would not be a comfortable challenge, so after workshopping their stories with Gillian, to find their beginning, middle and end, Kate Stuart demonstrated that writing a Quest story in 2018 can be a joy for a group of established digital natives. She demonstrated that StoryMap would prove to be the ideal digital storytelling app for their Quest adventures.

Gillian Brownson opted to use kinaesthetic learning techniques, challenging the pupils to move, use their voice and other senses to find their stories. Many games had the aim of understanding the hero’s journey, while others were about understanding narrative structures. Some of these games also inspired collaborative approaches, as final stories were produced by teams of writers in small storytelling groups.

They had become storytellers. They had become writers.

*Week 6 – 7*

Back to the University, this time for another sunny outdoor learning experience, creating dramatic freeze frames and guessing games on the grass in the courtyard, and going on a University led Quest, with printed cues to navigate their way around the campus and find the grail. Back at base at school, in their team-writing groups, they were continuing to put their stories down in StoryMap, and were also exploring their editing skills, before finally producing finished stories with accompanying sound & images – which they would present by storytelling along with their digital presentations.

*Week 8*

At a sharing event, hosted by the Centre for Arthurian Studies, in the Main Arts Lecture Theatre with a giant screen and tiered seating for 264 people, the group presented their stories using their voice and using StoryMap. Their parents were present as well as the University faculty. For one last time, they came together for the call and response ritual to affirm their motto, their fellowship oath, and they received a certificate from the University for their perseverance and discipline in what was, at times, a challenging project for at least some of them.

**Evaluation & Reflection**

Before starting the project, Gillian Brownson used ‘choice’ games and discussion as benchmarking tools to measure the group’s existing feelings and attitudes about stories, and recorded the following:

78.9% believed stories were only found in books.

89.4% did not enjoy stories because they did not enjoy reading.

4% of the group aspired to go to University/enter further education.

*“I don’t like stories.”*

*“I’m not that bothered about stories, because I don’t like reading.”*

Gillian Brownson responded to this information, by using activities designed to facilitate an understanding that stories are everywhere, a relatively small portion appearing in books. Together, they discussed stories in gaming, in the media, in their families, the oral tradition and slowly attitudes began to shift, as they also looked at the very many story formats for King Arthur (film, paintings, cartoons etc)

Post project evaluative activities showed:

75% now have a renewed interest in stories

81% Agreed that the project had been fun

68% would consider experiencing a story with a storyteller again, if they had the opportunity.

50% would consider writing/experiencing a story through digital storytelling independently.

25% would consider experiencing a story with an audio book.

37.5% want to actively find more about King Arthur while 63% said they may find out more.

50% said that they wished to attend University in the future.

*“Will this happen again for us?”*

*“This has been great, I want to do it again with another old story!”*

*“I’ve really enjoyed it and think I’m gaining stuff from it.”*

*“I like to communicate with everyone, I want to listen.”*

3 pupils agreed that they would continue working on their Digital Quests in order to enter future digital storytelling competitions.

**The Journey Continues**

A firm creative partnership has developed between Prof. Radulescu and Gillian Brownson, where a mutual understanding of the power within Arthurian myth and legend now resides. Through a delicate mix of scholarship and creative practice in Performance & Story, the partnership is able to navigate a path through a ‘Myths for Young People in Wales’ project and globally. The next steps for the project is to plan a Continued Professional Development resource for teachers, which taps into Arthur as stimuli for Growth Mindset development and Literacy development as well as an opportunity for more local community groups to understand how Arthurian myths and legends are linked to the land (with a Community Storytelling and Puppet event planned for 2019). Some of the ideas that have grown out of the initial project have also influenced the way in which *Quest* as a project aims to share its findings globally and hopes, going forward, to add to the endurance of this timeless story, gently placing it in the hearts and minds of the digital generation, who, it is hoped, will continue to benefit from its narrative majesty. As Prof. Radulescu wrote in her *Conversation* article, now shared more than 40,000 times across the world, and recently reprinted in the US and Japan:

[Modern people] want a standard of moral integrity and visionary leadership that is inspirational and transformational in equal measure, one that they cannot find in the world around them but will discover in the stories of King Arthur.

Is our modern appetite for fantasy a reflection of our need to reinvent the past, and bring hope into our present? Moral integrity, loyalty to one’s friends and kin, abiding by the law, and defending the weak form the cornerstone of how Arthurian fellowship has been defined through the centuries. They offer the reassurance that doing the morally right thing is valuable, even if it may bring about temporary defeat. In the end, virtues and values prevail, and it is these enduring features of the legends that have kept them alive in the hearts and minds of so many through the centuries.

(R. Radulescu, ‘How King Arthur became one of the most pervasive legends of all time’, *The Conversation*, 2 Feb. 2017: https://theconversation.com/how-king-arthur-became-one-of-the-most-pervasive-legends-of-all-time-71126)

In the words of the editor of *The Epoch Times*, where this article was reprinted just recently, ‘[our newspaper] wants to leave our readers with hope for the future and a reminder of the values that humans have always cherished and that are so deeply entwined with the beautiful, enduring legend of King Arthur. Keeping alive these ideals is more important than just about anything I could imagine’ – to which the editor added: ‘Please continue to your good work with a legend so potent and noble.’

With a new blockbuster movie *The Boy Who Wanted to be King* (Paramount, 2019) just out now, it seems the need to continue to inspire our young people to write their own Quest, while immersing themselves into the power of old stories, is greater than ever.