

**Festival Report: Free the Word! 2008**

**11 – 13 April 2008**

**A Celebration of World Literature  
by International PEN**

**Meet the great writers you know, and the great writers you don't**



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## **An Introduction to International PEN and the Festival Context**

Established in 1921, International PEN is the world writers association. It has three primary aims: the promotion of literature, the defence of freedom of expression and the development of a world community of writers and readers. International PEN has 145 offices in 104 countries. The head office of the organisation is referred to as International PEN and acts as the international hub for all of the Centres, each of which has members from across the literary world. International PEN has consultative status at UNESCO and the United Nations and is a UK registered charity (number 1010627).

Over the last 3 years International PEN has undergone a step change in activity. Having undertaken detailed consultation with the membership and key international cultural organisations, a three-year plan (2007 – 2010) has been agreed and is now being implemented. One priority was to establish **a major new international literary festival in London** to signal the importance of literature to International PEN and to reaffirm its position at the heart of the organisation.

The idea for **Free the Word!** was born: as a celebration of literary excellence, profiling the greatest names in world literature in a major new festival to be staged over three days at four major South Bank venues. The festival was to be distinctive from other literary festivals in the UK, both because of its international remit and because it would celebrate writers and readers from around the world exploring ideas and the role of writers in society, rather than focusing on the promotion of new books. There was also a policy to champion emerging talent in the festival and to identify writers whose work has not yet been profiled internationally due to the limitations of publishing and translation, as outlined in the Report on the International Situation of Literary Translation published in July 2007 by International PEN's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee<sup>1</sup>.

The aim was to make the festival an annual event which would grow in scale in future years and which would also be the lead project in a series of international literary events organised by International PEN, linked by a shared theme to be explored through the website, magazine and at conferences and events.

**Free the Word!** took place in London from 11 – 13 April 2008 at four key venues: the Southbank Centre, the National Theatre, the Young Vic and the Old Vic theatres.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/internationalpen/files/dmfile/translated.pdf>

# Free the Word!

## Overall Aims

- Fulfill International PEN's key aims of promoting international literature in all its forms
- Raise the profile of International PEN in the UK and internationally
- Create a space for dialogue and exchange
- Promote increased levels of translation and publishing, and raise the profile of works in translation
- Creating a festival which will appeal to current and new live literature audiences

## Festival Objectives

- 1) Stage a three day international literary festival which delivers the five principle aims outlined above
- 2) Establish the festival as a major event in the London and international literary calendar
- 3) Play a key role in the long term process of change, developed through International PEN's international programmes and engagement with reading and writing
- 4) In London: to engage existing arts (as well as literature) audiences, new audiences and less represented communities, specifically targeting Muslim and Asian young people – thereby broadening live literature audiences
- 5) Ensure access for all (tickets and programme)
- 6) Feature both established and emerging writers
- 7) Ensure the events explain and portray the unique work and approach of International PEN (i.e. freedom of speech, translation, international community of writers etc.)
- 8) Through the festival, commission new works and disseminate them as widely as possible

## Festival Timetable

- **Friday 11 April:** 2 events, plus a private opening party for partners, associates, festival participants and friends of International PEN
  - ***The Writer Next Door*** with Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt) and Maya Jaggi (UK)
  - ***Sacred Land: A Place Called Home*** with Ngûgî wa Thiong’o (Africa) and Alexis Wright (Australia)
  
- **Saturday 12 April:** 7 events, plus lunch for the festival writers and International PEN staff and Board members, to give them an opportunity to meet one another and feel part of the International PEN community
  - ***Found in Translation 1*** with Emine Sevgi Özdamar (Turkey / Germany) and Maureen Freely
  - ***International Poetry*** with Yang Lian (China) and Tze Ming Mok (China / New Zealand)
  - ***Found in Translation 2*** with Sjón (Iceland) and his translator, Victoria Cribb (UK)
  - ***The Rights of the Reader*** with Daniel Pennac (France) and Alberto Manguel (Canada). Unfortunately Azar Nafisi was unable to take part in this event, as originally billed, due to ill health.
  - ***The Insulting Cabaret*** produced in association with The Hub and featuring Sjón, Abdellah Taïa (Morocco / France) and a host of other artists
  - ***The Literary Walk*** – ran twice on Saturday, led and performed by Outreach programme participants
  
- **Sunday 13 April:** 8 events and a private closing party
  - ***A Short History of Sediton*** with Francisco Goldman (USA / Guatemala), Perihan Mağden (Turkey) and Abdellah Taïa (Morocco / France)
  - ***Faïza & Friends*** with Faïza Guène (France / Algeria), Cleo Sozandry (UK) and Kadija Sesay (UK)
  - ***Festival in a Thimble*** featuring writers and participants from elsewhere in the festival in this ‘Highlights’ event
  - ***Meet The Playwright*** with Hassan Abdulrazzak (Iraq), Andrew Steggall (UK) and Mike Bartlett (UK)
  - ***International Futures*** with Mohamed Magani (Algeria), Nii Ayikwei Parkes (Ghana), Selma Dabbagh (Palestine), Maria Francesca LoDico (Canada / Italy) and Niki Aguirre (Ecuador / UK)
  - ***Enchanted Endings*** with Salman Rushdie (India / UK) and Lisa Appignanesi (UK)
  - ***The Literary Walk*** – ran twice, as per Saturday

# Review of Festival Aims and Objectives

## 1) Stage a three day international literary festival which delivers the five principle aims outlined above

- The festival took place over 3 days, from 11 – 13 April at four key venues along London's South Bank: The Southbank Centre, The National Theatre, The Old Vic and The Young Vic theatres
- There were 14 events over the 3 days (the Literary Walk ran four times but is counted as just one event)
- We featured 21 writers from 22 countries and also involved a range of translators, interpreters, young writers, Chairs and facilitators
- The events covered a wide range of literary forms: novels, poetry, short stories, drama, reportage / non-fiction, memoir and extended essay

## 2) Establish the festival as a major event in the international literary calendar

- Free the Word! was timed to take advantage of the London Book Fair which took place immediately afterwards. It was also well placed in the Festival Calendar – 6 weeks after Jewish Book Week (23 Feb – 3 March), 5 weeks after the Bath Literature Festival (28 Feb – 8 March), a month after the London Word Festival (22 Feb – 14 Mar), 6 weeks before the Hay-on-Wye Festival (22 May – 1 June), and 4 months prior to the Edinburgh Book Festival (ensuring that many of the international writers featured at **Free the Word!** can make their UK premiere at the International PEN Festival)
- Marketing and Promotion were key to establishing the reputation of the festival in its first year. Key components of our marketing and promotion strategy are listed below:
  - Distinctive visual identity created in collaboration with leading design agency Pentagram (please see enclosed Festival brochure)
  - Brochures and postcards distributed widely through various arts networks across London (e.g. London Calling, Literary London and London libraries) and to embassies and cultural centres
  - Advertising predominantly through print media: Guardian Review, Guardian Guide, Time Out, LRB, TLS (French literature issue) and Bookseller online
  - Specific event flyering in the month prior to the festival at literature events and arts venues (e.g. Bookslam and Southbank Centre events)
  - Festival event information sent out to e-lists of our venue partners and Foyalty members (loyal customers of Foyles Bookshop)
  - Foyles bookshop window displays featuring the books of festival writers
  - The support of our principal sponsor Bloomberg was displayed on T-shirts and on four festival banners which were placed on stage and in foyer

areas. The T-shirts were worn by festival volunteers and the Outreach participants who led and performed in the literary walk 4 times over the festival weekend, so providing a great vocal moving advert for the festival.

- The support of our funders and Festival sponsor Bloomberg was displayed on our print material: brochure, A2 and A3 posters, postcards and invitations
- 73% of respondents in the Audiences London survey reported that the festival information was 'very good' or 'good', with 44% rating our festival brochure as 'very important'
- A major priority was to address the difficulties in securing press coverage for literature events not associated with a book launch, or where the writers taking part are relatively or completely unknown in the UK
- Given that this was an entirely new festival, our brief went beyond simply attracting audiences to literature events to establishing the identity and uniqueness of **Free the Word!** We succeeded in securing significant festival coverage from in-depth interviews to listings. Selected highlights were:
  - 5 – 11 April 2008. The Guide – The Guardian's Saturday listings magazine. Preview focus on Free the Word!
  - 5 – 11 April 2008. The Independent. Festival listed first in 'Five best talks & festivals'
  - 8 April. Guardian Arts Blog. Hassan Abdulrazzak – The Middle East Has Culture, Not Just Terrorism
  - 9 April 7.15pm. BBC Radio 4, Front Row presented by Mark Lawson. 'Tom Stoppard and Chinese Poet Yang Lian join Mark to discuss freedom of speech, the central issue for International PEN as it launches Free the Word, its first ever festival of world literature which forms part of a series of events taking place around the South Bank in London this weekend.'
  - 11 April Guardian Arts Blog. Sarah Ardizzone – Why London Needs Another Literature Festival
  - 11 April. Independent Online. Boyd Tonkin interview with Salman Rushdie
  - 16 April. Guardian Arts Blog. Lucy Popescu – Translated From Arabic
  - 25 April 8pm. Resonance FM, Clear Spot presented by Tim Girven. Francisco Goldman talks about his book, 'The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed Bishop Gerardi?' which subsequently went on to win the Index on Censorship TR Fyvel Book Award

### 3) **Play a key role in the long term process of change, developed through International PEN's international programmes and engagement with reading and writing**

- Crucial to the Festival's international scope is the knowledge and enthusiasm of the PEN centres and members worldwide whose connections, influence and activism in their own countries and internationally can help to magnify and extend some of the key aims and messages from the festival.

- PEN Centres are involved in a wide range of activities and schemes in their own countries, be that at a grass roots level, cross-regional or across several countries. The Festival provides an opportunity for some of this important work and for emerging writers around the world to be championed and presented to new audiences, as occurred within the *International Futures* event.

**4) In London: to engage existing arts (as well as literature) audiences, new audiences and less represented communities, specifically targeting Muslim and Asian young people**

- Existing audiences with a particular interest in translation events were presented with a new space and a new format in the two *Found in Translation* events and in *International Poetry* as well as *International Futures*
- The Insulting Cabaret event attracted brand new audiences beyond the regular literature crowd with its wide-ranging content and late evening slot
- The results of the Audiences London analysis show that over 15% of festival audiences were new to literature events, a statistic assisted by programming some of our events in venues not normally associated with literature. The survey also showed that 45% of audiences polled were under 35.
- Our Outreach programme was specifically designed to reach Muslim and Asian young people and saw a total of 97 participants taking part across 3 strands as follows:
  - *Migrating Words*: inter-generational story-telling workshops at a school in Tower Hamlets involving parents and young children (45 in total)
  - *Slam the Word*: poetry workshops for 25 young people aged 16 – 18 in schools in East and South London, some of whom went on to appear at the festival 'Highlights' event at the Young Vic theatre
  - *Moving Words*: 27 young people worked alongside two artists and a facilitator to create and lead four literary walks around the Southbank as part of the festival

**5) Ensure access for all (tickets and programme)**

- Core policy to use festival funding to provide affordable pricing to all and as a consequence, 9 of the 13 ticketed events cost just £5 or less. 61% of respondents in the Audiences London survey rated the value for money of festival tickets as 'very good'.
- Of the remaining 4 ticketed events, reduced price tickets were available to young people (under 26) and only one event (*Enchanted Endings*) was more than £10
- Total festival audience of 1,876 (this includes both tickets sold and complimentary tickets allocated to partners, staff, associates etc.)
- 1,359 tickets sold, exceeding our target of 1,200 ticket sales, a figure based on a 60% capacity audience

- Ticket income of £6,898 – exceeding our target ticket income of £3,775, based on 60% capacity audience
- Wide range of content and styles, presenting both established and emerging writers. Younger people were particularly attracted to *Faiza & Friends* featuring a young French-Algerian ‘street’ writer alongside a Brixton slangsta.
- Capitalising on partner venue databases to reach new audiences
- Next year we plan to programme a free ‘Highlights’ event – please see the recommendations on page 9.

## 6) Feature both established and emerging writers

Examples of interesting curation include:

- *Sacred Land: A Place Called Home* featuring Ngûgî wa Thiong’o, one of the most widely read contemporary African writers alongside Alexis Wright, an aboriginal author whose second novel won Australia’s most prestigious literary prize
- *International Futures* featured several emerging writers and this event was deliberately positioned immediately prior to *Enchanted Endings* with Salman Rushdie
- The festival ‘Highlights’ event presented an exciting mix of writers from across the festival. Hosted by Ngûgî wa Thiong’o, the audience were treated to readings and performances from Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Mohamed Magani, Sjón, Francisco Goldman, Yang Lian, Tom Stoppard, Faïza Guène, Cleo Soazandry, Maureen Freely, Stephen Watts, Martin Chalmers, Jamal Msebele and Femi Akinsanya, the latter two having come through the festival’s Outreach programme.

## 7) Ensure the events explain and portray the unique work and approach of International PEN (i.e. freedom of speech, translation, etc.)

- Events such as *A Short History of Sediton* and *The Insulting Cabaret* drew attention to freedom of expression issues
- The two *Found in Translation* events focused on translated literature and the use of interpreters in other events also reminded audiences that this was a festival of literature from all around the world
- International PEN’s commitment to emerging writers was in evidence at a number of festival events, including *International Futures*, *Faiza & Friends*, Hassan Abdulrazzak in *Meet the Playwright* and Abdellah Taïa in *A Short History of Sediton*
- The Outreach Programme gave voice to a number of young people whose exceptional creative and literary talents augur well for future generations of readers and writers

**8) Through the festival, commission new works and disseminate them as widely as possible**

- Given International PEN's global presence, we wanted to ensure a positive two-way flow of creativity, from PEN centres and members all around the world to the festival and back again. Input from PEN centres was vital in helping to establish the festival's identity, the annual literary theme and in recommending writers for the festival.
- International PEN is taking advantage of both its newly redesigned website and magazine to widen the reach of the festival and to communicate news about other areas of International PEN's work. For instance:
  - Many of the recordings from the festival can be listened to on the International PEN website at [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk) so providing a virtual festival experience for those unable to attend
  - The Spring 2008 issue of PEN International magazine shares the annual literary theme of *The Writer Next Door* and includes contributions from 9 writers who appeared in the festival. Whilst some of these are extracts from previously published work, 3 of them were new commissions for the magazine.
- We commissioned The Hub, a dynamic and entrepreneurial arts development practice, to curate *The Insulting Cabaret*, an event featuring a diverse range of writers, poets and artists to create a thought-provoking, diverse and raucous show. Within this we also commissioned a new piece from Sjórn.
- The Outreach Programme was an entirely creative and productive enterprise in which the young participants delivered a wealth of new work, much of which was aired to appreciative audiences following the Literary walks and during the *Festival in a Thimble* event

## Recommendations for 2009 Festival

### Key Recommendations

- Given the success of **Free the Word!** 2008, the key recommendation is that it continues and that plans for 2009 forge ahead.
- Dates for next year's **Free the Word!** are 17-19 April 2009. This will help us to further develop the festival's relationship with London Book Fair which takes place from 20-22 April 2009.
- Consolidate the success of the first year by not attempting to grow the size of the festival in its second year, but by building on the relationships established with partner organisations in the first year.
- Staging the Festival across four prime London arts venues is excellent for Festival audiences and profile; however, labour intensive coordination involved should not be underestimated, nor the issues of four different box offices and correspondent booking fees, which are not user-friendly for the general public.
- Develop a comprehensive media campaign, making the dynamic of the festival itself – meet the great writers you know and the great writers you don't - the media story, leveraging headline names to engage press interest; look to secure a media partner; continue to raise the international and virtual profile of the Festival.
- Because it was the inaugural year of the Festival, there was a relatively short programming-period – now that visual identity, title and basic format of the Festival have been established, maximize time allocated to commissioning and programming for future editions.
- Pursue a more consultative process in respect of the Festival, drawing on the expertise, knowledge and influence of other PEN centres, Board members, Author Advocates, partners and industry advisors.
- Build on the link with London Book Fair for greater reciprocity between Free the Word! (public-facing) and the book trade; particularly with a view to profiling foreign language writers unknown in the UK.
- Seek to secure sponsorship for a free Festival Highlights event, making the Festival truly accessible and to attract new audiences.
- Simplify ticket prices as far as possible, ensuring access for all but not devaluing the events.

## **Programming and Artistic Recommendations**

- Develop a strong Festival theme for 2009 to promote the global experience of a Festival rather than simply a series of events.
- Involve the partner venues and wider literary community more fully in the programming of the events.
- Develop a central hub area (comparable with the LIFT tent at Southbank Centre) where writers and public alike would be able to mingle and relax.
- Engage and work more effectively with publishers, cultural institutions and embassies to create demand for literature in translation.
- Continue to attract new audiences through key crossover events such as the Cabaret.
- Expand the representation of theatrical writing in the Festival, as well as short-story, graphic novel, genre, poetry, reportage etc.
- Secure funding to commission more new work and translate more texts into English for the first time.
- Offer workshops as part of the Festival programme to increase audience participation and to vary the nature and format of events available.
- As recommended by Maureen Freely, explore potential collaboration with the Moth Story Telling Project <http://www.themoth.org> for live story-telling events at the Festival.
- Audiences responded positively to the intimate, informal feel of events in a bar/ café space with refreshments available (eg. the Cut Bar at the Young Vic) – keep looking to develop alternative environments for literary events.
- Draw more on the grass roots knowledge of PEN centres worldwide in order to bring on emerging talent as also identified through the regional focuses (Africa, Latin American, Middle East), the work of the International Programmes team and the commissioning of PEN International magazine.
- Leverage the exposure offered by Free the Word! to impact on international literature and publishing strategy in the UK and beyond – one such example might be campaigning on encouraging two-way traffic between Arabic writers having their work translated in Hebrew and vice versa.
- Tighter guidelines and briefings on chairing events.
- Ensure that all events fully reflect International PEN concerns and areas of interest and activity, as well as making more connections with International PEN centres and committees through event briefings for participants, and in introductory or closing remarks. NB. Introductions should be kept as short as possible – any follow-up points should be made in closing remarks.

## **Press, Marketing and Publicity**

- Produce integrated schedule with all elements of festival for availability September 2008. (To include initial press activity – ‘hold the date’ statement pre-Christmas). At least, six month press and marketing lead-in with theme and headline writers.

- Media partner. Define new parameters July/August and approach late summer 2008. Potential partners could include the Guardian, Independent, Financial Times, Time Out, Economist, International Herald Tribune. Assess current media partnerships and the benefits ie. Guardian partnership with Hay and Brighton Festival. This positioning exercise will help us define what we want and in which area ie. advertising support, editorial coverage (and within this innovative bespoke ideas that integrate the outreach programme with big-name writers and the public), viral campaigns etc.
- Consolidate marketing partnerships in January ie. inserts into Time Out, Visit London web promotion campaign, capitalise on profile-raising potential at Jewish Book Week and further capitalise on publicity opportunities through London Book Fair and the international reach of Bloomberg (if our partnership is repeated). Also, piggyback venue seasonal marketing activity with postcard insert 'hold the dates' and letter ps's.
- Create cross-venue marketing opportunities from an early stage (see first point in venue liaison section).
- Approach schools and potential group bookers early in the new year. (Define group booking policy or adhere to venue policy). Potential to draw on relationships with schools connected by outreach programme across venues.
- Bespoke marketing and press support for the outreach programme where required.
- Allow more time for audience research development and implementation.
- Establish group of well-known names as advocates from the outset ie. Sir Tom Stoppard.
- Launch **Free the Word!** 2009 with a press lunch. Provide with information about the festival. Allow for Q&A. Well-known writer/International PEN author advocate in attendance as well as key International PEN staff.
- Campaign to begin pre-Christmas with holding statement and general information to catch long-leads.
- Place key pieces in the international media for 2009.

## Outreach

- Develop the potential to link in more closely with the education departments of theatre venue-partners – eg. the Young Vic have expressed an interest in a scriptwriting course, and there may be the possibility to link in with the New Voices strand at the Old Vic.
- The timing of Easter and school holidays meant that there was little opportunity to market to schools or potential groups in 2008. This also affected the timing and availability of participants in the Outreach programme. More resourceful strategies should be adopted to combat this in 2009 (Easter is on 12 April 2009, 5 days prior to **Free the Word!**)
- Increase the level of practical and artistic support available to the community group for greater attendance at and participation in the festival – this may involve creating opportunities to participate in a post-talk discussion with a mentor.
- To better situate any inter-generational outreach strands within the main body of the Festival, potentially look to run a children's storytelling workshop programmed to take place at the same time as an event for adults, which the

- parents could attend. This would not only fulfil an educational brief but would be a way of extending the audience that could attend.
- Involve local libraries who could also include displays of books by writers involved in the Festival.
  - There has been clear enthusiasm from the International Programmes Team, Eastside Educational Trust and '26' to develop an international story-telling relay which might involve leading International PEN writers, PEN centres, outreach programmes related to in PEN Centres around the world and the UK outreach strand specific to **Free the Word!**

## Project Management

- If a central hub area for the festival is developed, International PEN would like to investigate the possibility of a book stall – to be costed and approved by **Free the Word!**'s book-selling partner, Foyles.
- As a matter of policy, as many writers participating in the Festival to have access to one complimentary ticket per event as possible.
- Strict policy on complimentary tickets to be observed with International PEN Board Members.
- Clear policy to obtain permission from writers for all their events to be audio-recorded; sensitivity to be observed from a human rights perspective in terms of an individual's security. If an event is to be filmed, the writer needs to be notified and give additional permission.
- Event-management was excellently handled by Joule events. In addition, for 2009 we would seek to secure
  - A Volunteer Coordinator responsible for assigning volunteers and International PEN staff to chaperone individual authors where appropriate - volunteer duties to be assigned at least 2 weeks prior to the festival and volunteer briefings to take place a week in advance, including familiarisation of venues.
  - A Project Manager responsible for ticket/box-office coordination and handling complimentary tickets, as well as managing the database for Festival-related invitations and mail-outs.
- Potential for greater visual signage around the Festival site.
- Potential for listening posts in the Hub area and elsewhere around the festival sites.
- The original plan of dedicated 'Festival rickshaws' to transport festival-goers between venues proved too expensive for 2008, but we recommend re-investigating this option for 2009.
- Creating a festival map for 2009, to reinforce the sense of an integrated festival (this could be in the brochure).
- Account with a taxi firm for transportation of writers.
- Need to agree a clearer policy for latecomers, particularly in respect of small venues.
- Repeat the writers' lunch, which provided an excellent bonding opportunity for Festival participants ere everyone gets to meet everyone else and the IP staff too.

## Legacy

- **Free the Word!** has brought new audiences and readers to international writers. This will help change reading habits and create a demand for international writing and writers to be more widely available and accessible.
- International PEN is seeking to impact on international publishing and so greater collaboration with the publishing industry is desirable for future Festivals.
- The work generated should be disseminated via the International PEN magazine, the International PEN website, and the websites of member centres across the PEN community – as well as through the websites of partner organisations
- International PEN should be seen as exponents of 'best practice' in interpreting international literary events
- The Outreach programme should be seen as a repeatable 'best practice' for other festivals and cultural events, also with an eye on the cultural Olympiad in 2012

## **Festival Overview: Free the Word! 2008**

### **A Celebration of World Literature by International PEN Meet the great writers you know, and the great writers you don't**

**“I've been to several festivals of literature in London, but never one that has drawn together such a wide and interesting range of writers from all across the globe and given a platform to so many urgent and courageous voices...”**

*Charles Beckett, Literature Officer, Arts Council England (London)*

**Free the Word!**, is a ground-breaking initiative by International PEN to establish a brand new kind of literary festival. Our express aim has been to create and nurture a refreshing meeting place of ideas, cultures and languages for public and writers alike – an aim we feel proud to have delivered on, as eighty-nine percent of audience polled said that **Free the Word!** events ‘provide opportunities for authors to come together and share ideas’. Despite a challenging festival market in London, International PEN was mindful of a growing need and appetite for better access to writers and writing from around the world. We only had to look to our colleagues at the PEN American Center in New York, and the extraordinary success of *World Voices* as championed by Salman Rushdie since the festival began in 2005, to see how empowering it is when a spotlight is shone on writers as respected spokespeople in society, rather than star-turns on the celebrity circuit.

#### **Festival Theme**

In order to bring coherence both to the Festival itself and to the worldwide literary work of International PEN's 145 member centres in 104 countries, the theme for **Free the Word!** 2008 – the 2008 annual literary theme for all of International PEN – was chosen with those member centres. The focus of our literary agenda this year was proposed by Fred Armentrout, President of English-speaking Hong Kong PEN Centre: *The Writer Next Door*. A deliberately inclusive theme, our intention was to use this to encompass and reach out to as many writers and readers as possible for our inaugural festival. This playful, almost enigmatic theme, inevitably poses many questions into the bargain. Just who is this writer? Does he or she speak the same language as me? What are our shared values in the republic of words? And, taking the theme at face value, is that door opened or closed? In support of his suggestion, Fred Armentrout wrote:

‘The deepest and most direct way for one neighbour to know another is to have access to their most personal thoughts, which is the special gift writers give to their own cultures and languages and, in translation, to the world.’

*Fred Armentrout, President of English-speaking Hong Kong PEN*

**Free the Word!** is a London-based world literature festival, but its outlook is truly international. This is reflected both in terms of content and the audiences that we are aiming to reach, from the international publishing industry in London for the London Book Fair, to different communities and nationalities throughout the UK, to virtual audiences across the globe; as well of course as the International PEN world community of writers. So it was particularly important to us that the theme should prove compelling in International PEN's two other official languages, French (*Mon Voisin, l'Ecrivain*) and Spanish (*Mi Vecino, El Escritor*). Testimony to this three-way traffic of ‘translatibility’ has been the French and Spanish-language response to the theme for PEN International Magazine – the latest issue of the Magazine (June 2008) has taken the Festival theme as its title. As a theme, *The Writer Next Door* embodies the sense of writerly community that lies at the heart of International PEN. It also raises questions about access and censorship key to International PEN's campaigning work, whether this is on freedom of expression, translation rights or simply removing barriers to accessing literature; these might be financial barriers, as with book taxes in Africa, or publishing and distribution issues. As a Festival, **Free the Word!** aims to remove barriers to accessing the best in world literature – in order to facilitate a memorable live literature experience; and to help re-define expectations of what that live literature experience might be.

Critically, *The Writer Next Door* captures the spirit of International PEN as an organisation, as well as alluding to our unique literary pedigree. We are the representative body for literature at UNESCO and the United Nations, and as members our writers the world over feel a strong allegiance towards us, in what frequently amounts to a personal relationship. We therefore see it as one of the clear objectives of the Festival to encourage luminary writers of international stature, including Nobel Prize-winners, to endorse new and emerging names breaking through onto the global platform.

### **Venues and Festival Visual Identity**

A key factor in raising the profile of **Free the Word!** lies in establishing a strong sense of festival identity and buzz. Geographically, **Free the Word!** benefited from four prime venues along London's South Bank – National Theatre, Southbank Centre, the Old Vic and Young Vic – who all brought significant prestige as well as proximity and coherence to the Festival. Each venue proved a hub in its own right, both socially and artistically. Crucially, all the venues had their own databases which had the potential of bringing new audiences to International PEN's celebration of world literature; this was especially relevant since only one of these venues had significant prior experience of staging dedicated literary events (Southbank Centre). We made good use of the very different spaces available to us across these four venues, from the large auditorium of Queen Elizabeth Hall to accommodate Salman Rushdie and the audience of nearly a thousand that he attracted, to the intimate and informal setting of the Cut Bar in the Young Vic theatre. We also made good use of smaller rooms in the Spirit Level, a relatively new space in the Royal Festival Hall, where we programmed several translation and poetry

events which attracted near-capacity audiences. By placing literature in unexpected but high profile venues, we reached new and diverse audiences. We also benefited enormously from close collaboration with all four venues, both artistically and practically.

**“The National Theatre was a great space for this event, it also comes with the added bonus of its own audience database that can be tapped into.”**

*Jessica Axe, Publicist, Fourth Estate, HarperCollins – on the Alaa Al Aswany opening Platform event at the Lyttleton Theatre*

A critical factor in ensuring the coherence of the Festival across the four venues was the splendid visual identity, designed pro bono by Harry Pearce of Pentagram. The bold, stark, spare visual style of logo and print material guaranteed maximum impact in a cluttered market – interestingly, 44% of audiences polled said that our festival brochure was very important in bringing them to **Free the Word!** The logo also proved distinctive whether in print form or projected in animated version.

### **Writer-Led and Writer-Friendly**

For the inaugural edition of **Free the Word!**, one of the writers we chose to invite was the essayist, novelist and translator Alberto Manguel, precisely because we felt we could offer him something more nourishing and enlightening than the state of affairs he bemoans in his foreword to *A Reading Diary*.

“Reading is a comfortable, solitary, slow and sensuous task. Writing used to share some of these qualities. However in recent times, the profession of writer has acquired something of the ancient professions of travelling salesman and repertory actor, and writers are called upon to perform one-night stands in faraway places, extolling the virtues of their own books instead of toilet brushes or encyclopaedia sets.”

*Alberto Manguel (A Reading Diary)*

Instead, we were able to oversee some informed literary matchmaking, engineering the on-stage encounter between Alberto Manguel and Daniel Pennac: the Frenchman being a writer Manguel has admired all his life, but never had the opportunity to meet. This encounter was suggested by the US-based Iranian writer Azar Nafisi, a close associate of Manguel’s since they were both judges on the first International Man Booker Prize. (Nafisi was unfortunately unable to join the event in the end, due to ill-health.) Both Manguel and Pennac were visibly excited to be discussing their ideas about ‘The Rights of the Reader’ and ‘The Library of the Imagination’ at the Purcell Room, Southbank Centre. Such a meeting of minds proved an apposite vindication for Alberto Manguel who, some twenty years earlier, had recommended to a small Canadian publishing house that Daniel Pennac’s ‘The Rights of the Reader’ be translated into English – the two men referred to the latest UK translation (2006) of that seminal text in their

conversation, this latest translation having been made possible through the process originally set in motion by Alberto Manguel.

### **Best Practice in Interpretation**

*The Rights of the Reader* event was simultaneously interpreted by Carine Kennedy, MA, Member of the Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIIC), Member of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (MITI), and Member of the Institute of Linguists (IOL) – an interpreter with 25 years of experience. In relation to **Free the Word!** International PEN is committed to making non-English speaking writers such as Daniel Pennac more accessible to Anglophone audiences. Naturally, as concerns future parallel festivals around the world, the specific translation issues will be different, but the principle of overcoming linguistic barriers in live literature events through exemplary professionalism still stands. With skilful interpretation of the highest order (rather than well-intentioned literary translators roped in to interpret for their authors) it becomes a pleasure and a privilege to hear a writer speaking in his or her own language. Such barriers have long been overcome in the fields of ‘world music’ and ‘world cinema’, and it is incumbent on organisations such as International PEN to set the benchmark for impeccable interpretation.

### **Literature in Translation as a Core Strand to Free the Word!**

It is a key aim for **Free the Word!** to stimulate and enhance access to the highest quality writing in translation. London is a pluricultural city where over three hundred languages are spoken, but this is not reflected in our access to translated books. (The statistics are frequently cited, with only 3% of the UK’s and USA’s total publishing output originating from another language – hence the recently established Three Percent Prize for translated foreign fiction in the USA.) Given that London is a mercantile and cultural port of such international stature, it is frustrating that our traffic in world books should be so negligible. A book is one of the cheapest, most accessible and democratic passports into the culture and imagination of another country – with it, we can tiptoe into the minds of thinkers and creators in societies radically different from our own, as well as both exploring and beginning to play out an alternative to cultural norms. In an era where fundamentalism in all its various guises is on the rise, and where cultures assert themselves in opposition to each other, this subtle, horizon-expanding function is precious indeed. This in turn chimes with International PEN’s clearly stated aim of engaging and empowering societies and communities across cultures and languages, through literature, reading and writing; and with the premise of inter-cultural dialogue which underpins our Festival. Above all, these are the issues explored in *To Be Translated Or Not To Be*, the report from International PEN’s Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee, by Esther Allen in association with the Ramon Lull Institute of Catalan language and culture. (This can be downloaded from the International PEN website at <http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/internationalpen/files/dmfile/translated.pdf>.) The report proved critical in leading to the development of **Free the Word!**

## Anglophone-Specific Problems Relating to Translation

The publishing of books in translation for the Anglophone world comprises a complex production chain, and one where every link on that chain warrants analysis. At an educational level, we need to encourage greater take-up of foreign languages in schools, but also greater affirmation of bilingual students who may not necessarily think of themselves as ‘translators’ when they interpret for parents or family members, and who are even less likely to consider bringing their linguistic skills to bear on a career in publishing. In addition to encouraging more diverse reading tastes that genuinely reflect a range of world views, exposure to world books and affirmation of language skills may in turn prove a career vehicle. There is the potential here to encourage a new generation of professional ‘readers’ who scout and evaluate books for UK publishing houses, with a keen eye on and understanding of the market. These ‘readers’ might in turn report to a new generation of editors, with knowledge of languages beyond the traditional West European core (French, Spanish, German, Italian and occasionally Russian) and who may be inspired through continuing professional development (CPD) to re-appraise their approach to working with translators and to editing translations. An example of good practice in this field is the Editing Forum on Translation run in partnership with The Society of Authors/Translators Association, The British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), British Council, Arts Council England and Dalkey Archive Press<sup>2</sup>, which took place in London just prior to Free the Word! 2008. International PEN may look to collaborate on such initiatives, specifically with a view to profiling the work in future editions of **Free the Word!**, both at public-facing events and at the London Book Fair. International PEN has unique access to the literary knowledge and expertise of the staff and members of the 145 PEN centres worldwide; closer collaboration with the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee is particularly desirable in this regard.

## Marketing and Publicising Literature in Translation

The next key link in the publishing production chain relates to the commitment of marketing departments to the translated literature they are in the business of promoting. The tales are legion of publishing houses re-couping most of their translation costs through a grant from a relevant embassy or cultural institution, but failing to follow through with any further marketing and publicity commitment. Books that aren’t marketed have a habit of sinking without trace, having barely featured on bookshop shelves or in display areas. This is where the English PEN Writers in Translation Scheme supported by Bloomberg has been so successful: making a noise at precisely the point where books in translation tend to become invisible. This scheme has brought writers such as Anna Politkovskaya, Alaa Al Aswany and Faïza Guène to a wider UK-reading public. International PEN has assiduously built on these solid foundations, both by profiling some of the Writers in Translation authors in **Free the Word!** (Alaa Al Aswany, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Faïza Guène were all featured in the 2008 Festival) and by creating the International PEN Bloomberg Book Club. The Bloomberg Book Club features Festival writers and offers Bloomberg staff the opportunity to ‘go in deep’ in an informed hour-long discussion with an expert on the book, such as a translator, editor or journalist in the field. This is in contrast to the pre-existent and very popular Bloomberg Bites

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<sup>2</sup> A summary of this forum by James Smith is available at <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/show/feature/search/Translation-editors>  
The 18,000 word publication by Dalkey Archive Press will be available in Autumn 2008

series, which also take the form of hour-long lunchtime sessions, where staff listen to a writer in conversation, followed by Q&A.

Of course, for a marketing department to seriously get behind a foreign-language writer, its staff need to know there will be public vehicles and platforms for that writer. By opening **Free the Word!** 2008 at London's National Theatre with the Egyptian writer, Alaa Al Aswany, International PEN was able to do just that. Below are the comments of Alaa Al Aswany's publicist, Jessica Axe, for whom the Festival really did change the rules on what was commercially achievable for a foreign writer visiting London:

"We were delighted to be involved with Free the Word! Alaa Al Aswany is a wonderful ambassador for the growing market of writers in translation and we were thrilled that he was able to be part of this new festival and bring his writing to a new audience. London based literary events are increasingly hard to get audiences for so we were very pleased with the 200+ that came on a Friday evening and not only enjoyed themselves, but also bought a huge number of books afterwards."

*Jessica Axe, Publicist, Fourth Estate, HarperCollins*

Closer collaboration with publishers next year would facilitate a greater impact at the level of marketing and publicity. Additionally, tie-in events, such as 'Meet the Writer' and book signings at the Gallery Space in Foyles, Charing Cross Road just prior to **Free the Word!** are desirable in this context, whilst Alaa went on to feature as 'Author of the Day' at the London Book Fair<sup>3</sup>.

## Found in Translation

**It's really made me realise how few translations I read and it's definitely changing my mind. So it's working, isn't it?**

*Melissa Wolfe, '26' writer*

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for a festival predicated on celebrating international literature in an accessible format, lies in changing hearts and minds about the perceptual and perennial problem that 'translated' is almost *de facto* a pejorative epithet – with the age old tussle of *traduttore* versus *traditore* (a potentially dull *translator* versus a rendering by a promiscuous *traitor*). International PEN was particularly conscious of this challenge, given that 2008 is the year of Inter-Cultural Dialogue at the European Commission and, in relation to our own remit, a core aspect of that dialogue lies in overcoming linguistic barriers.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.londonbookfair.co.uk/page.cfm/Link=266/t=m/goSection=45>

"I believed Yang Lian when he said that the best way to read is to translate, because it requires you to 'cut in to' the language. He described translations of his poetry not as his own work but as trees growing from the same ground."

*Rob Williams, Creative Director, Penguin<sup>4</sup>*

**Free the Word!** offered two dedicated *Found in Translation* events and one *International Poetry* event, which took place on the Saturday afternoon in the recently opened and experimental space of the Spirit Level at the Royal Festival Hall – this is Southbank Centre's designated area for Learning and Participation. Turkish writer and performer, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, took to the stage first in conversation with journalist and translator Maureen Freely. Next was Chinese poet in exile, Yang Lian, talking to second-generation New Zealand poet, journalist and sociopolitical commentator Tze Ming Mok about the 'translation games' in which they had engaged (please see the blog entry below for an explanation). And finally, Icelandic defender of 'small languages in a big world', award-winning author, poet and Bjork-collaborator Sjón discussed his latest novella 'Blue Fox' with his British translator, Victoria Cribb.

One of the most evocative descriptions of these events comes from John Simmons, a Founder Member of 26, which is a not-for-profit organisation that brings together writers, language specialists, editors, designers and publishers among others to raise the profile of words in every day life. 26 (<http://www.26.org.uk/>) devised an imaginative partnership with International PEN for the inaugural edition of **Free the Word!** 2008. 26 members created and contributed to a dedicated Festival Blog, *Free the Blog!* (<http://freetheblog.typepad.com/>) as well as providing mentoring for some of the outreach participants, who have since gone on to secure placements in prestigious companies such as Orange.

"Two wonderful readings on Saturday afternoon made an uplifting change from my usual Saturday torture of watching football. First Yang Lian reading his poetry and talking to the Chinese Tze Ming Mok from New Zealand. The basic idea was lovely. Yang Lian read one of his poems (about Stoke Newington!) in Chinese; then a reading of a literal translation by Jacob Edmond; then a version by Tze Ming Mok (she 'half speaks Chinese') in English; then a translation by Yang of the previous version into Chinese; then a final version by Jacob into English. Confused? It was fascinating Chinese whispers, somehow appropriate for a writer-in-exile like Yang. He suggested that the best way of reading is by translating and I think he's right [...]

Then Sjón, the Icelandic novelist and Bjorn collaborator, in discussion with Victoria Cribb, his translator. Sjón, looking wonderfully nerdy, was as deadpan as it's possible to be and very funny. Having tried, as an experiment, to write the most Icelandic book ever, he was surprised when

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<sup>4</sup> Piece from Penguin's Creative Director, Rob Williams, on attending the Found in Translation Events – linked with Free the Blog!  
[http://thepenguinblog.typepad.com/the\\_penguin\\_blog/2008/04/freeing-stoke-n.html](http://thepenguinblog.typepad.com/the_penguin_blog/2008/04/freeing-stoke-n.html)

The Blue Fox became an international success, translated into 20 languages. Interesting facts emerged: the fox is the biggest land mammal native to Iceland apart from the human. How about this for a first line of a chapter: "The night was cold and of the longer variety". A structure to the novel of four chapters: white, dark, white, dark.

A lot to think about, a lot to enjoy. "In small countries we learn about the world from the stories of the rest of the world." The bigger the country the less able it seems to be, or less willing, to learn about the world from the stories elsewhere in the world."

*John Simmons, 26 Founder Member, **Free the Blog!***

What International PEN achieved through the *Found in Translation* events in the Spirit Level was a refreshingly upbeat atmosphere where audiences enjoyed instant post-event access to writers, and where the corner of a library or the dingy space rather too frequently allocated to translation events was replaced by an experimental and 'hip' environment. The *mise-en-scène* of the whole Festival was especially noticeable here – a play-list specially compiled by world music DJ Leon Parker was used to 'top-and-tail' events, while projections both of the Festival logo (also in animated version) and of Festival writers featured along the approach walls of the Spirit Level. By debunking some of the staidness that conventionally surrounds translation events, we were able to appeal to a wider public than just the cognoscenti of the translated literature world<sup>5</sup>.

## **The London Book Fair**

In contrast to the recently launched **London Literature Festival**, which showcases the best in British Talent – Brit Lit, if you will – along with international strands such as 'Mama Africa' and 'Booking Passage', the emphasis of **Free the Word!** is firmly on campaigning for greater access to international writers for London audiences. For this reason, it was imperative that **Free the Word!** took place over the long-weekend immediately prior to the London Book Fair and we will recommend that it does so again. Situating it at this juncture in the literary calendar ensures increased scope for public-facing events at the Festival to be re-presented or developed within an industry context, at the London Book Fair; this affords maximum opportunity to develop audiences and reach out to new readers, as well as impacting on trade. Additionally, this timetable has proved to be particularly writer-friendly. Whereas publishers, particularly small ones, might normally only consider bringing a writer to London from abroad in the context of a book launch, if International PEN is hosting and programming a writer to appear at **Free the Word!**, then the publisher is able to capitalize on the writer's presence in town to raise his or her profile after the Festival at the London Book Fair. In 2008, this two-way

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<sup>5</sup> As this report is being written, it has been announced that none of Europe's Centres for Literary Translation will be granted European Union funding for the next funding period – a further example of these key resource centres for literary translators being critically compromised. And all the more reason for International PEN to nurture such translators where possible, through the work of the Festival. This matter is currently being campaigned on by CEATL (the European Council of Associations of Literary Translators – <http://www.ceatl.org/>)

traffic was notably the case with Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt/Fourth Estate), Faïza Guène (France-Algeria/Chatto & Windus), Perihan Mağden (Turkey/Serpent's Tail) and Sjón (Iceland/Telegram Books). Looking forward to 2009, a writer of such international stature as Azar Nafisi (the US-based Iranian author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*), who was unfortunately unable to attend the 2008 Festival due to ill-health, is now looking to programme her UK book tour around **Free the Word!** 2009.

## Freedom of Expression Events

### “Free Speech is no tea-party”

*Salman Rushdie, Q&A with the public, Enchanted Endings,  
Free the Word! Queen Elizabeth Hall, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2008*

A primary objective of **Free the Word!** has been to reflect the way in which literature is at the heart of International PEN – bringing our extraordinary network of writers together, and raising our public profile as a literary event producer. International PEN is often best known as a human rights organisation, whereas we are a literary organisation with a human rights division. This means that we are uniquely positioned to present issues relating to freedom of expression in new, challenging and inclusive ways, as well as bringing the topics to wider public attention. The Cut Bar at the Young Vic proved an especially apt venue for our freedom of expression event, *A Short History of Sedition*.

Set against a backdrop of stunning raw brickwork, and using an impromptu platform stage with audience members informally gathered on benches and chairs within easy access of the bar, the rapport between writers and readers at the Cut Bar proved particularly fluid. The complicity between three radically different writers – Francisco Goldman from USA/Guatemala, with his uncompromising condemnation of the Guatemalan authorities complicit in the murder of Bishop Gerardi, Perihan Mağden using the allegorical tradition of Turkish oral story-telling to approach taboo subjects playfully, and the young and charismatic Abdellah Taïa recounting the lipstick-covered cigarette butts he collected as a schoolchild while waiting in the throng from dawn to dusk to greet King Hassan II of Morocco – truly struck the tone of a warm writerly community, cutting edge politics, and a passion for literature and its role in society that best reflects International PEN. This was a genuinely original encounter, sympathetically chaired by Morris Farhi. The outspoken Turkish novelist and columnist, Perihan Mağden, made a point of saying how touched she was to have been invited to participate in **Free the Word!** on the basis of her fictional writing, rather than purely on the strength of her political profile – this in turn freed her up to discuss both aspects of her work. (It is worth noting the dangers of ‘type-casting’ in relation to freedom of expression events, and the restrictions inadvertently imposed by curators when programming writers known for speaking out.)

Below is a brief review from another '26' writer who attended *A Short History of Sediton*:

In a society filled with book groups, costa coffee bookshops, Richard and Judy recommendations and celebrity writers, it is easy to overlook the position of the author and the purpose of their books: after listening to Perihan Mağdan, Abdellah Taia and Francisco Goldman, it is less so. These authors are risking their safety to tell stories which needed to be told, they are using the written word to provide a voice or as a means of self-expression, an assertion of identify. Their work had consequences, provoked actions and reactions, and had an impact.

Whilst I was struck, disturbed and moved by the readings which I heard, it is this re-evaluation of literature which will remain with me for the moment; and it is here, perhaps, that one of the greatest values of translated literature lies. It is not only the communicating of messages and expression of experiences which is so important; the value of texts from other countries also lies in their ability to make you question and change your own assumptions and attitudes. I am certainly looking at mine.

*Melissa Wolfe, '26' Writer, Free the Blog!*

**'I hope writers will be selected from all over the world, particularly developing world, where word is not free.'**

*Audience member in response to Audiences London survey*

Meanwhile, '26' blogger, Jonathan Holt remarked on the importance of translation being put to radical use, thereby neatly linking two key campaigning areas for International PEN, in terms of freedom of expression and the right to be translated:

"We all know about guerilla marketing and guerilla gardening, not to mention guerilla warfare and, um, guerilla guerillas. At *A Short History of Sediton* Francisco Goldman told a story that can only be described as a case of guerilla translation.

"It's fascinating to see how a book can become an object of sedition, a tool of sedition," Goldman said, referring to his book *The Art of Political Murder*, which traces an eight-year investigation into the murder of a bishop who dared to confront corrupt authorities by investigating a genocide.

The book implicated the leading candidate for Guatemalan president (among many others) in the murder. The establishment retaliated with a huge propaganda campaign. Then as the election neared, young activists took action, "downloading information about the book in internet cafes, translating it, photocopying it and standing outside the cemetery on the Day of the Dead and handing it out." The candidate lost, and words won..."

*Jonathan Holt, '26' Writer, Free the Blog!*

## Meet the Great Writers You Know, and the Great Writers You Don't

Returning to the central premise behind **Free the Word!** – the allegiance that writers feel towards International PEN, and the way in which International PEN's access to the writerly community can be leveraged to encourage eminent writers to endorse emerging ones – this dynamic was not only apparent in the structure of the Festival as a whole, but also in a raft of individual events. It was a conscious curatorial decision, for example, to programme the rising stars of world literature in *International Futures* as the penultimate event immediately prior to Salman Rushdie as the headline name closing the Festival with *Enchanted Endings*. Such crossover was equally manifest in *Festival in a Thimble* (Free the Word! Highlights), which was hosted by Professor Ngûgî wa Thiong'o, and included 'best of' participants from the Outreach Programme who enjoyed rubbing shoulders with a wide range of authors from across the Festival, as well as a star-turn from one of International PEN's Author Advocates, Sir Tom Stoppard.

"I'm not a performer, but I've always written, so the best thing for me was stepping out of my comfort zone because I actually get incredibly nervous when I think about even speaking in front of a small group of people. So for me it was an accomplishment."

*Outreach participant*

Another of the '26' bloggers adeptly described the Highlights event, which International PEN hopes to make a free celebration in 2009, as 'More Than a Thimbleful of Talent':

A Chinese exile once remarked to me: 'in your country everyone is free to say exactly what they like. Only nobody listens'. This observation has been on my mind lately since I joined the blogosphere [...] The internet means everyone can find a voice, everyone can be published. This doesn't mean anyone will be read or even noticed. Cramming our messages into bottles and tossing them into the vast oceans of cyberspace, a hundred million castaways, hope forlornly for a readership.

Yet, there is worse than indifference, as my trip to the Young Vic on Sunday to sample a Thimbleful of the Festival brought home to me. It was another Chinese dissident, a poet, Yang Lian, exiled for his words, who underlined this point, and humbled my vain petulance into shame. He also read a few lines from another poet, who was serving a ten-year prison sentence (a sentence for a sentence), for an intercepted email. An Algerian with a tale of torture (which he somehow managed to make blackly humorous), forcibly underlined one of the purposes of Free the Word, which is to do exactly that.

Not everyone who read from their work was a political exile. Icelanders, Americans, even Sir Tom Stoppard, made an appearance, and added to the mix of voices and cultures filling the foyer of the Theatre, and enlivening a damp dull Sunday afternoon. It was like randomly roaming the airwaves. One minute tuning into the sounds and stories of Turkey or Morocco, the next street poetry from East London. The latter from a cheeky chap called

Jamal Msebele (otherwise known as Lord Microphone) who declared he was fourteen years old, but eighteen on Fridays. Fourteen and published, and staggeringly talented too. The young performers were the biggest delight for me. A girl of seventeen from Wembley, Femi Akinsanya stood six feet and confident on the stage as she intoned her poem powerfully. It ended: 'Be proud of your voice. Free the word'. She was, and then so was I, once more. A Thimbleful of such determined dedication to be heard was exactly what I needed.

*Robert Mighall, 26 Writer, Free the Blog!*

The dynamic of shining the light on writers coming on through was equally relevant to *A Short History of Sediton* (which immediately preceded the Highlights). Here, the impressive reputation of Francisco Goldman<sup>6</sup> meant that International PEN attracted audiences who might never have heard of the other writers with whom Goldman was sharing the stage – Abdellah Taïa, for example, has yet to be published in the UK although *L'Armee de Salut* is due to be published by Semiotext(e) in the US.

**"My role as a novelist is to explore ideas and imagination, and hopefully that will inspire people from my world to continue dreaming and to believe in dreams."**

*Alexis Wright*

A prime example of 'partnering' established and emerging names was **Free the Word!**'s launch event for 2008, *Sacred Land: A Place Called Home* – which set the benchmark for the kind of generous encounters that lay in store over the long weekend of the Festival. Master Kenyan storyteller and novelist in exile, Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, one of the most outstandingly satirical voices in African literature, captivated the Purcell Room audience with his offerings from *Wizard of the Crow*. Perhaps even more importantly, he exuded an infectious enthusiasm for the work of emerging Aboriginal Australian writer, Alexis Wright, as they discussed her novel *Carpentaria*. Both writers were eloquent on the subject of giving voice to the voiceless and negotiating land – whether literal or metaphorical territory – for those deprived of it.

"...the late afternoon and evening events [...] were all very interesting, introducing me (and I'm sure others) to wonderful new voices that I will read as well as to familiar writers I will continue to read."

*Joanne Leedom-Ackerman,  
Writer, Vice President and former International Secretary of International PEN*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Art of Political Murder* also went on to win the T R Fyvel Book Award at Index on Censorship's Freedom of Expression Awards 2008

For many, *International Futures* proved one of the most refreshing highlights of the Festival. Like the *Found in Translation and International Poetry* events, this took place in the Spirit Level. As has already been mentioned, the bright stars of the future (and, in the case of Mohammed Magani, an established francophone name who, despite being firmly positioned as part of a renaissance in African literature by *Vanity Fair*<sup>7</sup>, has yet to break through into the anglophone world) were programmed just prior to the Salman Rushdie closing event, *Enchanted Endings*. The challenge here, facilitated by the consummate hosting skills of Ghanaian writer, poet and publisher Nii Ayikwei Parkes, was for each of the five writers to present a compelling snapshot of their work in just ten minutes. Part of the extraordinary energy of this event was generated by the rules of the game – and, astonishingly, the event came in under time, triggering a sense of achievement for audience and performers alike. All these rising stars particularly benefited from staying at the same hotel as other writers across the festival – The Goodenough Club, Bloomsbury – where sharing breakfast with inspiring names was a bonding experience and again encouraged the sense of writerly community. Perhaps Tze Ming Mok put it most succinctly when she wrote to thank us, generously donating her writer’s fee back to International PEN:

‘I really enjoyed myself, and am very grateful for the opportunity to have met such an inspiring bunch of writers.’

*Tze Ming Mok, writer, International Futures*

## **Outreach Programme**

In 2008, we were delighted to be running our outreach programme as a core strand of **Free the Word!** As one of the three national PEN Centres associated with the Festival (the other two being African Writers Abroad and Writers in Exile), English PEN, in discussion with Arts Council England, had elected for the Outreach Programme specifically to target Asian and Muslim communities. International PEN’s community delivery partner on the Outreach Programme was Eastside Educational Trust. The Outreach Programme involved 97 participants, ten of whom were also mentored by ‘26’ writers.

The three strands of the Outreach Programme comprised *Migrating Words* (inter-generational story-telling workshops at a school in Tower Hamlets involving parents and young children); *Slam the Word* (poetry workshops for young people aged 16–18 in schools in East and South London, some of whom went on to appear at the festival ‘Highlights’ event at the Young Vic theatre); and *Moving Words*, in which 27 young people worked alongside two artists and a facilitator to create and lead four literary walks around the Southbank as part of the festival.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/artcul/070701vf.asp?sector=ARTCUL>

**“How incredibly mature for people of that age to have such insight and perception into the human condition.”**

*Tom Lynham, ‘26’ Writer –  
on attending one of the four Literary Walks devised by the Outreach participants*

International PEN was thrilled both by the expert facilitation of Eastside Educational Trust and by the quality of the work produced by the young people and impressed with the energy and commitment they brought to the programme, which proved extremely successful in achieving its objectives in terms of:-

- Overcoming some of the barriers to arts participation through directly engaging young people from ethnic minority communities
- Enabling young people to explore their creativity, produce new work and crucially, to have a platform at the festival to showcase their work
- Exposing young people to new writing and new ideas, with a particular emphasis on freedom of expression
- Enabling access to writers who encourage and inspire – the French writer, Faiza Guene, attended one of the literary walks and chatted to the young people afterwards. They were really excited to meet one of the festival writers and particularly one belonging to an ethnic minority group in France who has made a name for herself as a writer at such a young age. Many of them went on to attend her event at the Old Vic theatre on Sunday afternoon<sup>8</sup>.

“The wet and windy walk was fabulous. We were blasted around the South Bank so we didn’t have to walk anywhere. It was amazing, I was so impressed by the standard of writing and how sophisticated it was.”

*Tom Lynham, ‘26’ Writer*

- Improving the confidence and self-esteem of young people and opening up the idea of writing as a potential career path
- In terms of a legacy beyond the life of the Festival, we’re delighted to report that 9 of the participants in the Outreach programme took part in a mentoring programme supported by the ‘26’ writers’ collective and that two of these young people have also gone on to undertake longer mentorships with the Brand Director at Orange

In researching the Outreach Programme, International PEN was interested not only in proposing writing to the programme’s participants as a means of creative expression, but also as a viable route to earning a living – this is where the partnership with writers from

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<sup>8</sup> International PEN programmed Faïza Guène in her only public-facing UK event in 2008. *Faïza & Friends* proved an opportunity for Faiza to develop, in discussion with the Chair, Kadija George, President of the African Writers Abroad PEN Centre, her own thinking about the *banlieue* as the ‘new French colonies’. This was an idea Faïza went on to develop in conversation at the London Book Fair, two days later.

'26', who have strong creative, branding and media contacts, proved especially fruitful. The commercial fees commanded by '26' Writers might also be a means of funding more personal writing projects – as, famously, was the case of Salman Rushdie, who has been associated with the 'Go to work on an Egg' slogan from his advertising days.

"I work with words everyday, but I plan to continue writing creatively in my spare time, perhaps fiction. I'm also on the lookout for writers' groups that will enable me to continue networking with other like-minded individuals."

*Outreach Participant*

International PEN has begun to respond to a range of issues raised by the Outreach Programme. For example, in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, how might literature (both reading and writing) be beneficial to the prospects of ethnically diverse young people? And why might the arts shape their aspirations rather than the attractions of the professions or more conventional entrepreneurship? What skills from their own cultures, including bilingualism, give them a leading edge? And, in a UK context, how might their writings shape a continually evolving sense of modern British identity and history? How does this inform international dialogue?<sup>9</sup>

### **Insulting Cabaret Attracts New Audiences**

**“No matter how much you write about bread, it won't stave the rumbling in somebody's belly. That said, *For Bread Alone*, by the late and formerly illiterate *Mohammed Choukri*, translated by Paul Bowles, changed the outlook of a generation of Moroccans, and went on to inspire authors such as the young Abdellah Taïa, who will be reading from *Choukri* in his contribution to our *Insulting Cabaret*.”**

*Why London Needs Another Literary Festival - Sarah Ardizzone, GuardianBlogs*

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<sup>9</sup> Further reference material for International PEN in researching the Outreach Programme: **Time Out Magazine** (17-20 Oct 2007) *Why are the Arts so White?* Lead article by Sonya Dyer, Hackney-based BME visual artist who challenges current thinking about arts organizations attempting to encourage cultural diversity (her paper, 'Boxed In', is available from [www.manifestoclub.com/aa-diversity](http://www.manifestoclub.com/aa-diversity) )  
BBC Radio 4's **Open Book** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/openbook/openbook.shtml>  
18/11/07 – programme featuring **Books for All**.  
'News of a scheme aimed at promoting books to readers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Samenua Seshar, of Arts Council funded project Decibel and Londonstani writer Gautam Malkani join Mariella Frostrup.'  
[http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project\\_detail.php?sid=8&id=758&page=2](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=8&id=758&page=2)

Going by the sheer volume of audiences turned away, *The Insulting Cabaret* was **Free the Word!**'s runaway success story – we could have sold the event three times over. In collaboration with artistic co-producers, 'the hub', our aim was to generate a genuinely daring and risqué atmosphere where writers appearing elsewhere in the Festival featured alongside musicians and comedians in an event inspired by '*the right to insult and to be insulted*' – a theme that lies at the heart of the work of our Writers in Prison campaigning team. Above all, we were interested in creating an alternative environment that would appeal to new audiences, both as a Free Speech event and as a fun and stimulating night out that wouldn't attract the usual literary crowd.

The Hub describes itself as "a kind of philanthropic organisation, which uses an entrepreneurial approach to do work it thinks is important"<sup>10</sup>. It has five areas of focus: research, consultancy, live events, digital projects and skills development and has proved an excellent partner for International PEN – since the hub was looking to engage with more internationally-facing work, while its ongoing 'Phrased and Confused' project means that it is particularly active in the encounter between spoken word and music events.

Abdellah Taïa and Sjón were the two **Free the Word!** writers appearing in the *Insulting Cabaret*, which was hosted by surreal comic duo Noble and Silver, fresh from their live *Manifesto* show as part of the British Library's Breaking the Rules season. Noble and Silver specialize in environmental and ambient events. The line-up also included British-born performance poet Zena Edwards, French-Cameroonian beatboxer Patrick Biyik, Lecoq-trained *Jammy Voo* Theatre Company, Columbian salsa musician Dorance Lorza, performance poet Matt Lloyd and Iranian female stand-up, Shappi Khorsandi, known on the circuit for her sell-out one woman show *Asylum Seeker*. Subsequent to the *Insulting Cabaret*, Shappi Khorsandi was approached by the National Theatre for future programming.

Taking over the Late Lounge slot at the Lyttleton Terrace Bar of the National Theatre, the Cabaret offered a genuinely alternative atmosphere in which to experience a spoken word, free speech and music event. It attracted brand new spoken word audiences, as well as providing **Free the Word!** 'veterans' (ie, those who had already attended a range of events in the Festival) with a fresh forum in which to re-appraise what they had seen so far. The Cabaret also triggered new commissions, such as '*Colour Me Unclean: The Rags of Europe*' by Sjón.

## Conclusion

The inaugural edition of **Free the Word!** has successfully demonstrated that there is a genuine demand from the literary community and the public alike for an ongoing dialogue and celebration of world literature in London. The Festival is well-positioned within the literary calendar and has already established a certain prestige which it must now build on in terms of original, accessible and bold curation that brings world books and literature in translation to the widest possible audience. The challenge now lies in developing this intricate process of 'inter-cultural dialogue' to ensure maximum impact

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about the hub, please visit <http://www.thehubuk.com/>

both in engaging new readers and audiences and in encouraging a change in perception about the commercial viability of literature in translation. Finally, as a meeting place for original literary encounters, the Festival must continue to develop the live and virtual experience as a story and a cause for celebration in itself.

**'I am still deeply moved by PEN's festival, I feel that it meets all I want politically and poetically, and it actually touches the very root of [being] human and [of] literature, the real root where all the great and beautiful trees should grow from!'**

*Yang Lian, Poet*

Sarah Ardizzone  
**Literary Events Director**

## WITH THANKS TO...

The success of this inaugural edition of **Free the Word!** has been thanks to the commitment and support of the International PEN staff, the International Board and our Author Advocates, English PEN and the PEN centres and members worldwide, but also to the invaluable contributions, both artistically and practically, from collaborators and partners:

- ❖ All our venue partners: The Southbank Centre, National Theatre, Young Vic and Old Vic theatres
- ❖ Joule Events: venue liaison and event management
- ❖ Eastside Educational Trust: community partner in the delivery of the Outreach Programme
- ❖ Foyles Bookshop: distribution, marketing, book signings, window displays
- ❖ The Hub: co-producers of The Insulting Cabaret
- ❖ Pentagram: design agency
- ❖ Margaret\_: Press and PR agency
- ❖ '26' writers: mentoring for the young people involved in the Outreach programme and reviewing festival events on a dedicated festival blog
- ❖ All the writers, translators, interpreters, artists, chairs and Outreach participants who took part in the festival and so readily entered into the spirit of **Free the Word!**
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