

The One-Night House / Tŷ Unnos

By Tamar Williams and the children of Powys schools

Once upon a time, there was a long road that led all the way through Wales, from the North to the South, from the East to the West. This was the Long Welsh Tramping Road. Everyone journeyed on this road. Farmers taking their animals to market. Travelling salesmen, travelling storytellers, travelling musicians.

There was a wild place where the long road passed over a small hill that stood with its feet in a bog. At the top of that hill, you were about as far from anywhere as it was possible to get. There were no farms, no towns, no houses at all, not for miles and miles. If you were walking along the road and you came to that hill, you knew you'd have hours and hours of tramping ahead of you before you reached a place where you could get a plate of food, or a place to lay your head down for the night.

Back then, Wales was a wild place. There were strange ways in this land, strange roads to travel and strange laws, and most of the land was wild and unclaimed. One of the strangest laws was the law of the Ty Unnos: The One-Night House. The law stated that, if you were a person with no home, you could claim any patch of land for your own, and build a house upon it, if you could do so in one night.

So, if you were a young person with no land of your own, or someone who'd fallen on hard times, this is what you'd do. You'd gather some friends, take a wheelbarrow of earth and rocks, take your shovels and some snacks. You'd take the long Welsh tramping road to a wild place, a bit of land to which no one had yet staked claim: maybe the side of a mountain or a bit of bog. As the sun set, you'd start to work, as fast as possible, digging foundations, piling up rock and earth, shoving slats of wood in place of a roof. If by the time the sun rose the following day you could have a fire burning in your new fireplace, you could claim that the house was yours. You'd stand on the doorstep of your new house and throw an axe to the North, the South, the East, and the West and wherever the axe landed would be the boundary of your new property.

So, sometimes travellers to this wild and unruly land would find themselves in the strangest and most solitary of spots being confronted by a wonky house with a roof of bundled straw. There would be a fire burning merrily and its light would shine out through the unshuttered window-frames. Sometimes, if a traveller was lucky, they'd be welcomed into the Ty Unnos as the sun started to rise and its new inhabitants celebrated their achievements. And the traveller might return a few years later to see that the house's rough earthen walls had been replaced by stone, and the roof was newly thatched, as the fortunes of the people inside had improved but still there would be a welcome there for the traveller, for the same hearth would be glowing with a warm fire.

Maybe some travellers even looked out for a Ty Unnos in the throes of being built. Certainly, the old piper would do so. He was used to long walks along damp winding lanes,

over bog and hill and wild windswept mountain-top, for he was a travelling performer, and made his money going to the fairs and the festivals. If he was lucky, he'd find a big house on his journeys, knock on the door, and exchange his music for a bed for the night and a plate of food. He'd play with his hat upturned at his feet and, if he was lucky, a few coins would be thrown in, to see him through the next few days. So, as he walked the wild ways, in all kinds of weather, the old piper looked out for lights glimmering in the gloom – because lights meant people, and people, if they wanted music, meant food and lodging.

On this particular night, the old piper was walking the Long Welsh Tramping Road, and he'd quite given up looking for lights because he knew where he was coming to. There before him was the hill rising out of the bog and he knew he was miles from anywhere. There were no farms, no houses, nothing at all for miles and miles. And he was tired. The wind whipped his cheeks, the rain soaked through to his bones. It was growing dark. There were hours of walking ahead of him.

The piper reached the top of the hill. He stopped short in surprise.

On top of the hill, there were lights.

On top of the hill was a house.

The old piper stopped, amazed, for he had passed by this place just a few nights before and there had been nothing here, just bog and wind and rain, and now there was a house: a Ty Unnos, it must be, although never had the piper seen such a grand Ty Unnos before, with thick stone walls and – ivy? Was that ivy growing over the door? The house looked as if it had stood here for generations instead of a few days. Its doors – for there were two and they were carved from a heavy dark wood – stood open, and from within came the sounds of many people's laughter, and the smell of good food, and the piper's stomach rumbled.

So, the piper swallowed his confusion, and his amazement at such an unexpected sight, and up to the doors he went and peered within. There was a party taking place inside. A great throng of people – tables laden with food – a huge fire in the great hearth. He blinked; he was inside. Everyone turned: "Croeso! Welcome! The music has arrived!"

He was sat at a table, food was offered to him, and wine, which warmed him. And then the piper took out his pipes and played and played, and as he did, his hat – upturned at his feet – was filled with gold coins.

He had the best night of his life. You always do, at the Ty Unnos. The people who were there had the best night of their lives too.

The old piper played for what felt like much longer than one night. Then, he fell asleep, with his pipes tucked by his left side and his hat brimming with gold on his right. He fell asleep on the warm flagstones of the floor, in front of the fireplace, the fireplace and the flagstones that looked as if they had been there for years, but of course, that was impossible, for the Ty Unnos was just a few nights' old.

The piper woke with the cold seeping into his bones. Not just the cold of flagstones after the fire has gone out, the cold and the damp of boggy ground. He blinked. The dawn was

rising. There was a grey mist upon the small hilltop. The house, the fire, the people were gone.

There, on his left side, were his pipes. There, on his right, his hat. But when he picked it up, the gold that fell from it was the gold of falling leaves.

Ty Unnos: the One-Night House. People come and people go. They have the best night of their lives here, and often they never quite manage to find their way back again. There is always music in this place, always storytelling. But sometimes, if the Ty Unnos likes you, if you are the best musician, the best storyteller, the best performer...you are never allowed to leave.

Over time, the Ty Unnos changed. When the old piper had found himself inside it, high on the hill sticking up out of the bog, it had been an ancient house with a great fireplace, a place for songs and stories.

In the time of Celts, it had been a roundhouse, with a fire burning at its centre. In the time of the Romans, it had been a fabulous villa. In the time of the kings, it was a castle, where music and storytelling happened nightly in the great hall.

But it always wanted more. The show must go on, and the show must be bigger and better every single time. And so, as the centuries passed, the Ty Unnos changed its form. It grew hungry. It grew huge. As our story journeys on, we find ourselves at a new Ty Unnos – instead of a castle, a villa, or a great house on a hillside, it has become a theatre, lit with the glow of a hundred gas-lamps.

We've got pulleys and trapdoors, the gods up there and the orchestra tuning up in the pit. Welcome, welcome one and all! We've got it all here! Special effects. Light that powder and BOOM! The magic of theatre. The things this stage has seen! The audiences now want more than just a story, that's the problem. They want glitz and glamour. So, the Ty Unnos has had to work hard over the years, to keep the magic spinning. Sometimes, it's the strongmen and women they want – show us your muscles! How much can you lift? She lifted a pony over her head?! Sometimes it's the acrobats, spinning high above us, out over the audience, feathers flying. There are the poets, the one-act plays, the stand-up comics. You might see some of that tonight, too. But there's always room for a little music, too. We've always had music in this place. And, if they're very good, they never get to leave. The show must go on.

Despite all the changes, the dancing ponies and the acrobats, the mimes and the mediums, that deep hunger remained in the Ty Unnos. The walls shook, the belly of the orchestra pit grumbled. It always wanted more. It was so tired, and yet, the show must go on. It wanted to be the best. It wanted its audiences to leave wanting more, more, more. It needed the best live act ever.

Once upon a time there was a band, a travelling band, the best band in the world.

There were three people in the band. One was old and one was young and the third one was somewhere in between. This band knew all the songs, and all the stories, and all the best tunes that would get people dancing. It was said that the music this band played had been given to them by the fairies. An extraordinary gift, to have been gifted the fairies' music. Because it was fairy music, the band had an incredible responsibility: to keep the songs and the stories and the music safe! To keep playing them! To not forget them, to not let them die out!

That's why one of them was old, and one of them was young, and one of them was somewhere in between. Because they were mortal just like us, the band members would age as the years passed by, particularly because touring is exhausting work, and eventually the one who was old would die. By then, the one who was young would have reached the age of the one who was somewhere in between, and the one who was somewhere in between would be old, so they'd go ahead and recruit a new band member – someone young – and they'd teach that new person all the songs and the stories and the music – and so it went on...forever. That's how the band kept playing, and the music was always remembered. They always made sure that, when one of them died, a new member joined – a young one! – someone who'd live for a long, long time and keep their music going.

And so, the band travelled on.

And people started saying, The Band, they're absolutely brilliant. Their music is the best, like all the best gigs all rolled into one, like Taylor Swift but even better, like – do you have a favourite band? – like them. You will have the best night of your life ever, ever, ever if you get to see this band live.

The band started off small, in the early years. First, they were playing in the festivals and the fairs, the feasting halls and the big houses, and then the castles, for all the lords and ladies. They played in the great halls before battles and after great victories. As the world changed, as the centuries passed, the band kept travelling. They played in the village fêtes, in the school halls and community centres, in the pubs and the clubs and then they started doing medium-sized concert halls, and then – as the cities got built and people started being able to travel more – they started doing all the really big stadium tours, and at this point the Ty Unnos knew for sure – it wasn't just a story any longer. The Band was real. The band that could live forever, because they'd always have three members, one old, one young, one somewhere in between.

That's when the Ty Unnos had a thought: it gives people the best night of their lives, right? You come here for the best performances, the slickest acrobatics, the comedians that make your sides split with laughter, the dancing ponies and the dogs that balance balls on their noses, the strongwomen, the morris dancers and the mediums who speak to those who have passed on, the singing mermaids and the performing dolphins.

So, it was time for the Ty Unnos to work its magic, and get The Band booked in. And when The Band play on this stage, they'll never get to leave. Imagine that – the best performance venue you've ever been to, with the best band ever on the stage.

The audience will never want to leave either.

Just like the old piper so many years ago had found himself wandering through an open door, beyond which there were lights and the sound of people talking and laughing, the band found themselves wandering through a stage door, and stumbling onto a gaslit stage above which they could see hanging sandbags and stagehands ready to winch down backdrops or throw handfuls of feathers and glitter or direct a beam of light to a certain spot onstage.

There, lining the wings of the stage were all the other performers, those who'd performed night after night, for centuries, at the Ty Unnos. The woman who breathed fire, the man who juggled knives, the yodelling centaur, they were all here, ready and waiting, with bated breath, because this, after all, was the Band. The best band ever, the band that played the fairy music.

At that time, the members of the Band were as follows:

An old man called Finegas, whose hair was long and white, and whose eyes were very bright, and who knew the words to every song.

A silent bespectacled fiddle player, who hardly ever spoke, and whose music seemed to have the touch of the supernatural about it, whose fiddle tunes ran through your body, to the tips of your fingers and your toes, until every part of you was itching and twitching to move, and all you could do was dance.

And Lavender, who at the age of eight had picked up a cello in a charity shop and realised, with surprise, that she could play it.

So, here we are. The first night – the band's first performance in the Ty Unnos, and you, the audience – you're so lucky to be here to witness such a monumental event! Welcome, welcome one, welcome all, to the Ty Unnos, where the Band will sing and play forever...!

But as the audience waited with bated breath, and as the other performers stopped their fidgeting in anticipation, the Band put down their instruments.

"Esgusodwch fi." Finegas, the old man, speaks.

Yes, what is it? says the Ty Unnos.

"You can't make us stay here. We're The Band. We carry the music of the fairies, we're charged with the responsibility to keep it in the memories of as many people as we can. Why do you think we travel on, despite the breakdowns on the side of the M4 and the

bad travel-lodges and the extortionate price of train tickets? Despite the Tesco meal deals we have to live off, and the lumpy B&B mattresses we have to sleep on? We can't stay here forever."

Well, says the Ty Unnos, that's just the way things go. You don't get much of a choice. I have magic too, in my rocks and my stones, in my hearthfire that glows and entices the travelling storytellers and singers to enter. It's the magic of showbiz!

Lavender, the youngest member, cello bow quivering in her hand: "It's not right. We've been tasked with a duty, a duty to keep travelling on, to make sure the music never dies. We've sworn an oath. That's why we always have three members: one old, one young, and one somewhere in between. If you keep us here, we're breaking our oath."

There is a grumbling in the rocks of the Ty Unnos, the rocks that have been here since before there was a hall, when it was just a hill in a bog with a firepit on it. The theatre lights start to fizz. The gaslamps flicker. The cannons, ready to go boom at exactly the right time, gather themselves in preparation. The Ty Unnos is not happy, not one bit.

But an oath is an oath.

Finally: Fine, says the Ty Unnos.

The Band breathe sighs of relief. They start to set up their instruments. Finegas clears his voice, ready to sing. Lavender begins to tune her cello. The fiddle-player takes off their specs to clean them. Now, it's just a gig like any other.

Then: Wait, says the Ty Unnos.

The gaslamps shudder, just once. One of the dancing ponies snorts nervously into the silence.

The Ty Unnos speaks into the scared silence: Here's the deal. You play. You give us all the best night of our lives, because that's what happens at the Ty Unnos! Then, at the end, as the sun starts to rise, one of you can leave. Just one. I don't care which one. You only need one member, to re-form the band, to carry on the music. The other two, they stay here. They keep on playing.

There's a silence. The band gaze at each other. How on earth can they make the decision: who gets to go, who has to stay?

But the Ty Unnos isn't finished: It's not you who gets to decide...it's them. The audience. Each of you gets your moment in the spotlight. You can each tell a story, sing a song, do a dance, perform a magic trick – I don't care what. At the end, the audience gets to choose – the best song, or story, the thing that makes them feel the most, makes their hearts beat fast – that person gets to leave. The other two – you'll stay here, forever.

Finegas, the old man, says, "My time in the Band is nearly over. I have carried this music for nearly one hundred years. I cannot perform night after night, forever and ever. I need to rest. I need to return home, to the stones of my parents' house which has long since crumbled, to remember who I once was. I will not be the one to stay."

Lavender says, "When I first picked up that cello in that dusty charity shop on Albany Road, in Cardiff, I felt my fingers fizz. I felt the world spark with electricity. I put my bow on

the strings and the first note bellowed out and I knew I'd done something I could never take back. My life has not been mine since then. I'm not even fourteen years old and I've learned every note, every word to every song, and I know that to be in the band means to carry the music of the fairies. And I love it. I love the applause, the thousands of faces turned up to us as we foot-stomp and caper and make them dance, as they call out for "just one more". But one day, I want to make music just for the joy of it. I want to be normal again. I want to go home to my family, to my little sister, who I miss more than anything. I can't do that here, in this place where no one ever leaves, where nothing ever changes. I will not be the one to stay."

Finegas and Lavender both look at the fiddle player. The fiddle player looks back at them from eyes as black as deep water behind their thick spectacles, and shakes their head emphatically. NO. I will not be the one to stay.

"Then," says Finegas, "we must do as the Ty Unnos commands. We must each perform the best story, or song, or tune that we can. And they will decide who gets to leave, and who must stay. As the oldest member of the band, I will go first."

Finegas tells his story.

The fiddle player performs.

Finally, it is Lavender's turn, to perform for her freedom...

Lavender had been listening to all of this, her heart beating hard in her chest. She'd wept at Finegas' story. She, too, had not been able to keep herself from dancing when the fiddle player had brought the orchestra to life.

She held tight to her cello. This was her chance, to tell her story, to sing her way out of captivity on this stage forever. She thought of what she loved most about being in the band – the feel of her cello strings under her fingers, the new places, new faces every night. It would not be like that if she stayed here. She'd be playing in the same place – she could already feel how dull that would become, how even the thing she loved most of all – playing music – would become repetitive and, eventually, lose all its magic. She thought of her little sister, who she longed more than anything to see again.

I will not be the one to stay, thought Lavender.