

» Culture focus | Shoreditch Town Hall

We want to invite people to come and make magic

Director mines rich seam of potential at restored hall

by **Bridget Galton**
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It has staged music hall greats, sixties boxing matches and the inquest of Jack the Ripper's last victim Mary Kelly, but now Shoreditch Town Hall is re-building itself as a cultural and artistic hub.

Nick Giles took over running the Grade II-listed Victorian vestry hall two years ago following restoration.

He is building it into an arts centre at the heart of vibrant east London.

As well as being a hire venue for weddings and events, the building has held work by acclaimed theatre companies Paines Plough and the Almeida, a collaboration with Crouch End theatre school Mountview and the pan-London Lift festival.

Earlier this year Philip Pullman's adaptation of Grimm's fairy tales played in promenade in the basement "Ditch".

Future events include a tea dance, hula hoop classes with Marawa The Amazing and an art exhibition *Out of Our Heads* about the brain.

Giles, who has a background in running arts buildings including the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, said: "It went from a heritage project to save this incredible, grand building from the 1860s to taking stock with the question how do we make more of it?"

"We are trying to move it away from a dry hire venue to start to fill the space with activity and arts programming, comedy, and education work, but we are trying to grow sustainably and not



■ The stunning assembly hall inside Shoreditch Town Hall, and left, director Nick Giles



too quickly because we don't have huge resources."

Progress has included gaining an entertainment licence, a goods lift and £400,000 of capital work including putting seats into the assembly hall.

Other spaces include an

upstairs studio area, the old council chamber and adjoining mayor's parlour that can hold 200 people.

"We want to use the incredible spaces we have, inviting people to come and make magic here," said Giles.

"The assembly hall was designed as a large capacity audience hall to hold 2,000 people but with the seats it will be more like 800 capacity

"The other music halls, Wilton's and Hoxton from the 1800s are smaller scale.

"The big old music halls that once thrived around here have all gone except this one, it's the last remaining purpose built high-capacity music hall in this area."

Giles promises "a real mix" for audiences with short runs of a "collection of non-traditional theatre work".

"It's a perfect location right in the middle of an amazing and diverse, vibrant area – if you were to put it on wheels and move it two miles further up the road, our business plan wouldn't work," he adds.

"These are not traditional spaces, so why try to run a traditional programme?"

Unpredictable

"I look for off the beaten track, surprising, unpredictable work that will use the spaces to their best advantage."

Giles has a strong interest in both music and physical

theatre and can recall his own sense of wonder at first seeing *Complicité* and The Wooster Group.

"It was so unlike anything else I had seen. I still remember the feeling I had of excitement how that left me feeling.

"It released something in me and I want to try to give that experience to other people, to put on surprising and different work that changes people in the way that did to me all those years ago."

The next season starts in September with South African artist Brett Bailey who challenges European racism in *Exhibit B*.

"I hope to build a sense of trust with our audience and a diversity of what is on offer," Giles added.

» The Critics | Theatre

Mostly build-up... debatable climax

FOREPLAY
King's Head Theatre, N1
★★★★☆

"How long do you intend to draw this out?" So enquires German philosopher Adorno of his student-turned-extorter, who claims to possess the material influential academic Walter Benjamin smuggled out of Nazi-occupied Paris shortly before his death.

Yet the question could be addressed to Carl Djerassi, inventor of the Pill, who, in his 70s, swapped science for playwrighting.

Perhaps aptly, his *Foreplay* is almost entirely build-up. And what painfully painstaking build-up, with Adorno, wife Gretel and rival intellectual Hannah Arendt regularly halting the action to verbalise shared history.

Once the blackmailer unveils her diabolical demands, the play becomes more engaging, if something of a crime-drama pastiche, aided by Simon Slater's clunky piano cues and Andy Jordan urging his cast towards melodramatic hamminess.

Djerassi suggests Benjamin's treasure trove was not new work for public



■ Lesley Harcourt and Judi Scott
Picture: Andreas Grieger

consumption, but hidden evidence of adulterous correspondence and fetish pornography.

Mark Oosterveen and Laura Hanna are affecting as the epistolary lovers while squabbling thinkers Andrew P. Stephen, Jilly Bond, Judi Scott and Lesley Harcourt pompously ponder the fate of this revelatory material.

But Djerassi seems nervous of letting us ruminate without constant guidance. *Foreplay* feels like the opening seminar of an undergraduate course.

Whether it also earns its place on stage is a matter of debate.

Marianka Swain

Talented wordsmith makes an impressive debut

DEAD PARTY ANIMALS
Hope Theatre, Upper Street, N1
★★★★☆

Don't be put off by the dreadful title – Thomas Pickles' trim monologue has deservedly walked off with the inaugural Adrian Pagan award – a commendation exclusively reserved for those who work in theatre but are not playwrights.

From over 70 submissions, assessed by a discerning panel, this work earned the honour and a world premiere staging at The Hope Theatre.

Pickles provides a smart and entertaining journey into the sticky-floored nightclubs and tempestuous tempers of the intoxicated. At its heart is an ordinary tale of young life and love; lust and yearning competing in their destructive embrace for happy realisation.

Effortlessly loquacious, Pickles' words tumble in a dizzying cascade, like a slinky slipping down a staircase. He paces the stage with arms flailing, gesticulating wildly and his voice

masters its full dynamic range for theatrical effect. Indeed, the verbal dexterity on display is a privilege to observe and it's delivered with irrepressible enthusiasm.

On occasion, however, the poetic ramble can fall flat and the sinking feeling arrives that the narrative has been compromised by semantic trickery. Whilst this is an engaging and admirable work, it suffers from characters that are papier-mâché thin who emerge and disappear without substance.

In looking around and making these observations, the consequence is a lack of depth.

Ultimately, such complaints should not subtract from Pickles' many moments of acute observation and wry humour. He is a wordsmith of considerable talent and this should be the first of many plays written by his hand. To not do so would be a waste of a gift that clearly endows him generously.

The play itself is a qualified triumph.

Greg Wetherall



■ Thomas Pickles