

WHAT'S ON

THE ENTERTAINER

'England was bleak and going to the dogs'

For Gawn Grainger, *The Entertainer* is written by "one of the greatest playwrights of the twenty first century". So when he was approached by The Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company to star in its latest production of John Osborne's play, he didn't take much persuading.

Showing at the Garrick theatre, the Islington local will be playing the role of Billy Rice, father of the protagonist, failing showman Archie Rice played by Kenneth Branagh.

"For me, Billy Rice is a fantastic part in one of the greatest plays," says Grainger. "It was originally written at a time where things in the country were quite bleak and people felt England was going to the dogs. I think that this feeling is something that remains very relevant to this day."

The dynamic between Grainger and Branagh's characters is complex. The character of Billy Rice has spent his life as a successful showman who retired at the height of his career. His son Archie struggles to make a living in post-war Britain where the popularity of the music hall is in rapid decline.

"They are father and son, so there is an intense love between the two of them. But as his father, my character puts Archie down a lot. Billy was successful, so keeps telling his son how things should be

Gawn Grainger talks to **LUCINDA BORRELL** about appearing in Kenneth Branagh's *The Entertainer*

done. A lot of Archie's lack of success can be attributed to a change in the times. Music halls had started dying out by then which is something Billy doesn't seem to understand."

Like his character, Grainger has had a very long and successful career with a diverse range of work in his repertoire. Born in 1937, his first performance was as the Boy Prince in Ivor Novello's *Kings Rhapsody* at The Prince's Theatre when he was only 12. It was at that point that he "fell in love" with the profession.

Since then he has performed as part of the inaugural Lawrence Olivier company in 1976 and continues to perform on the London stage, with recent theatre credits including *The Crucible*, *Macbeth* (The Globe Theatre) and *The Cherry Orchard* (The Young Vic).

He said: "For *The Entertainer* I'm working with some really talented actors. I tend to find that the better the actors, the higher the stakes.

"We also get on really well, which



■ Gawn Grainger and Sophie McShera join Kenneth Branagh and the cast at the Garrick Theatre.

is fantastic." Grainger and Branagh will be joined onstage by a host of acting talent including *Downton Abbey*'s Sophie McShera as Jean Rice and Emmy Award winner Greta Scacchi as Phoebe Rice.

When details of the show were originally announced at the beginning of the year, it was John Hurt who was originally cast in the role of Billy, but he had to leave on the advice of his doctor following health problems.

Grainger admits that while he's thrilled with the role, he's also upset that Hurt won't have the opportunity to perform.

"John is a great actor and would

have been brilliant in the role, but he is also a great man and friend as well. It's very exciting to be taking over from him but it is also incredibly sad that he won't be able to play the part."

While the show will be located at the Garrick Theatre for the course of its run, there's also the opportunity for international audiences to see the production as it will be live streamed into cinemas across the world. Grainger believes this is a "wonderful" opportunity to engage with an international audience.

"The fact that the production is going to be shown live is wonderful.

And it's something I've done before. It's still great but it's also very scary as there's no room for error. If you make a mistake then a lot of people are watching.

"What's great both for us as actors and for theatre-lovers is that live streaming is an opportunity for more people to see the show. The performance isn't just available to audiences in London, or even people in the UK as the live stream will be shown in other countries all over the world."

■ **The Entertainer is at the Garrick Theatre from August 20 to November 12**

REVIEW

Pitch-perfect, spine-tingling '90s nostalgia

Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour National Theatre

★★★★☆

Six choristers harmonise angelically. When the last note of Mendelssohn dies, they slouch into their smoking, swearing, oversexed and hard-drinking selves. It's a juxtaposition that director Vicky Featherstone mines brilliantly in this exuberant, blisteringly funny play, which transfers to the National following an Edinburgh premiere and tour.

The gang of convent schoolgirls from a small, Scottish seaside town descend on Edinburgh for a choir competition – and 24 hours of escapist hedonism. A cracking

ensemble plays the six girls and everyone they encounter, from lecherous men to a formidable nun.

Lee Hall, of *Billy Elliot* fame, adapts Alan Warner's 1998 novel, retaining the earthy dialogue and picaresque structure – as brash, chaotic and impetuous as its protagonists. He's also attuned to the social commentary, with these girls doubly limited by class and gender, and painfully vivid encapsulation of what it feels like to be 17.

The group transcends their circumstances through friendship and music, with a varied set list – classical mixed with Bob Marley and Electric Light Orchestra – superbly arranged by Martine

Lowe (*Once*) and accompanied by an onstage band. Each spine-tingling number illuminates individuals and celebrates sisterly acceptance.

The cast is pitch-perfect: Melissa Allan's eager cancer survivor, Frances Mayli McCann's lippy Kylah, Caroline Deyga's yarn-spinning Chell, Kirsty MacLaren's hyper Manda, and Dawn Sievwright and Karen Fishwick revelatory in multiple roles, including a posh girl and tough leader with surprising hinterlands. Chloe Lamford's set, centred on their local disco, is authentically sticky and seedy.

With Nineties nostalgia (flaming sambuccas, Doc Martens and landlines), multiple coming-of-age



■ 'Heavenly joy'

issues and eye-wateringly frank exchanges – sperm is "like snot, but warmer" – some elements feel undercooked, like the Catholic repression fuelling rebellion. But

the unapologetic liberation of these vital, raucous, fearless and fragile girls, if temporary, is a heavenly joy.

Marianka Swain