

WHAT'S ON

#FESTIVAL46

Fangirling and foxes at new writing festival

Every time you click your fingers, a new show opens on the West End. As another musical from the makers of that musical you saw last year gets rave reviews, the emerging faces in playwriting are buried in the throng.

Giving a much needed platform for new writers to showcase their work, #Festival46 is featuring 20 shows from young production companies over the course of two weeks.

The King's Head Theatre has long been a champion of new work, and the festival is an example of this.

"This year's festival embodies the spirit of our venue," says Adam Spreadbury-Maher, the theatre's artistic director. "It's a place for early-career artists to develop their skills and a space for exciting young companies to perform alongside theatrical veterans."

Covering a diverse range of topics from internet censorship and mid-life crises to the creation of Frankenstein and Harry Styles fangirling, the festival showcases theatre, comedy and musical theatre all under one roof.

As part of the commitment to nurturing new talent, the King's Head has run their directing programme since 1994, taking on directors at the start of their career and mentoring them through directing and producing their own shows.

The four shows that have resulted

#Festival46 returns to the King's Head Theatre to showcase the talent of London's emerging playwrights

from this year's stock of directors are the centre-piece of #Festival46.

One of these plays is 'Phoebe', written by A.C. Smith, a playwright who has won awards from the Royal Shakespeare Company and Soho Theatre and has been shortlisted for a number of others.

Her play 'Phoebe' follows one young woman's attempt to make sense of the world, directed by George Smith and produced by Dave Spencer, two of the theatre's trainee resident directors.

When her brother goes missing, Phoebe sets out to find him, and battles her neighbours as they try to kill the fox she has befriended.

The play aims to challenge beliefs on mental health, representation of minorities and animal rights.

"It questions the idea of what it means to be 'normal'," she says. "It's important to remember that just because someone is different, it doesn't mean they're flawed or broken."

In 2013, Smith co-founded the



■ Adam Spreadbury-Maher

■ The Kings Head Theatre plays host to 20 shows during #Festival46.

Picture: ANNA BRUCE

London Playwrights Workshop, a website that provides support to emerging writers. Entering the industry when the effects of the recession were being felt, she noticed the "devastating impact" that arts funding cutbacks were having on her peers.

"I think it's critical now that emerging writers help each other out and take the initiative to self-produce," she says. "It's really

empowering to know you have the power to get your work out there'

Among the other festival highlights is Poor Michelle Productions' 'Harry', written by Caitlin McEwan, a play about female friendships and celebrity fandom through the eyes of two girls obsessed with Harry Styles.

"New writing engages with the world that is around us," says McEwan. "I think new work

festivals like this are really important to give new writers and new theatre companies a voice, particularly in such a prominent Fringe theatre like the King's Head."

#Festival46 runs from July 18-30 at the King's Head Theatre on Upper Street. Information and tickets for all 20 shows can be found at kingsheadtheatre.com

Zoe Paskett

THEATRE REVIEW

Urgent devastating storytelling from Syria

QUEENS OF SYRIA
YOUNG VIC

★★★★☆

Into the febrile cauldron of Brexit debate comes a devastatingly direct piece: 13 female Syrian refugees sharing their stories. This devised work – which began as a drama therapy workshop cuts through numbing statistics and dehumanising generalisations like "swarm of migrants", putting us face to face with survivors of brutal conflict. Their testimonies are refracted through Euripides's great anti-war play *The Trojan Women* – how little has changed since 415 BC. In Zoe Lafferty's restrained staging, the women appear on

screen or speak into microphones, while the rest sit and listen. The power of listening is key: these are voices often drowned out by the din. They read letters to lost family members, recalling familiar experiences, like sibling squabbling or breathing in jasmine, alongside horror. One gave birth alone in hospital – the staff fled during a bombing raid; another escaped with her children in pyjamas, turning to see her city on fire. "It was stay and die, or leave." They identify with their Euripidean counterparts: refugee Hecuba, enslaved Cassandra, bereaved Andromache. Reham Alhakim briefly breaks down as she recounts her aunt burying her

son. But they never invite pity. There's fury, brisk refutation of misinformation (they want to work and study, and they want to return to rebuild Syria) and parodying of patronising questions. Though we get lyricism and song, they're not here to entertain, but to communicate, in our language: theatrical storytelling, that great facilitator of empathy. Howard Hudson's lighting makes faces too indistinct, subtitles sometimes go out of sync with spoken Arabic, and the clarity of delivery varies, but the latter feels inconsequential. Their resolve, and faith in humanity, is awe-inspiring: "To light a candle is better than damning the darkness."

Marianka Swain



■ The company perform at New London Theatre on July 24 picture: VANJA KARAS