

Keats' move to verse brought to life in theatre

The moment Hampstead poet John Keats' turned from medicine to verse is dramatised in an immersive play in a 200-year-old operating theatre.

Audiences of 45 a time will watch Rebel Angel from the "incredibly claustrophobic and atmospheric" stands where medical students would often faint while watching operations.

The Old Operating Theatre Museum is near Guy's Hospital where Keats began studying medicine in October 1815.

Angus Graham-Campbell's play follows the year when he met contemporary Percy Shelley in Hampstead and had his first work published.

"It's exciting to bring theatre into such a vibrant active space," says Graham-Campbell, a trustee of the Keats-Shelley House in Rome where the poet died of tuberculosis in 1821.

An earlier version aired on Radio 4 on the bicentenary of the poet's birth and this revised production is funded by the Keats-Shelley Association.

"When Keats was 14 his dad fell off a horse and his mother got

consumption. He nursed her and later his brother Tom. In hindsight it looks odd that he wanted to be a doctor but he was a caring person who spent a great deal of his life looking after other people and I think would have made a brilliant doctor."

Graham-Campbell says the play is relevant to younger audiences in dramatising "the choice between a traditional money-making job and the arts."

"Keats is a writer whose early death, sense of melancholy, and charisma have given him rock star status."

It also reflects the pivotal role of mentors – Keats was assistant to notorious surgeon Bill 'butcher' Lucas while his inspirational teacher Charles Cowden Clarke introduced him to progressive ideas and the left wing Hampstead radical Leigh Hunt.

"It's about the people he was around, the bad medical mentors and terrific literary ones at that moment he was making the decision to give up medicine and commit himself to poetry. It's tremendous to write a site



Old operating theatre. Inset, Rebel Angel Jonny Taylor as John Keats

Pictures: MA WALKER/ IONA WOLFF

specific version of the play performed in exactly the kind of space he would have operated in.

"Keats wanted to write for the theatre like Shakespeare, so the old operating theatre doubles as Drury Lane the theatre he

aspired to write for."

Built in 1822, the theatre saw female patients endure surgery without anaesthesia or basic hygiene. Rebel Angel opens with a staged amputation and goes on to feature doctors, students,

bodysnatchers writers and friends who shaped Keats' decision.

September 19-October 7 at Old Operating Theatre in St Thomas Street oldoperatingtheatre.com.

Theatre

FOLLIES
National Theatre
★★★★★

Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman's 1971 musical finally gets the outing it deserves in Dominic Cooke's blockbuster revival - with a 37-strong cast and full orchestra. Follies isn't just "still here", it's thrilling, heartrending, spectacular.

The former stars of Weismann's (read Ziegfeld's) Follies, a hit revue between the wars, reunite in their soon-to-be-demolished Broadway theatre. Thirty years on, life choices are reconsidered, as they're faced – literally – with the ghosts of their younger selves.

Cooke uses the setting to thoughtfully explore the masks we don and roles we play, while nostalgia is both seductive and poisonous. Sally's married to salesman Buddy, while Ben and



18718 Imelda Staunton as Sally Durant Plummer in FOLLIES at the National Theatre.

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

Phyllis are in a chic but frigid society marriage, but Sally still fixates on the past, when Ben might have chosen her.

There are shades of Imelda

Staunton's Momma Rose in another girl who wants too much and rages against the world. She spits out the words in "Losing My Mind", a great

standard here almost too raw to bear.

Janie Dee lands Phyllis's caustic barbs, but her vocal command means she can also

layer emotion beneath the ironic "Could I Leave You?", and her dancing is equally impressive.

Philip Quast, another dexterous vocalist, exposes urban Ben's insecurities, and Peter Forbes's Buddy expresses agony via vaudevillian clowning. Alex Young is a feverishly neurotic young Sally, Di Botcher witty and dynamic in "Broadway Baby", Josephine Barstow brings operatic grandeur, and Tracie Bennett stops the show with "I'm Still Here".

Just as the score and book riff off period music and American ideals, Bill Deamer's choreography is cleverly referential, while locating the yearning soul beneath the razzle dazzle. Vicki Mortimer strikingly contrasts feathers and beads with crumbling walls, as we drift from regretful reality to dream and memory. Well worth the wait.

Marianka Swain