

WHAT'S ON

'Should I have learned the offside rule?!'

It has had two rom-coms, but this is the first libretto.

Nick Hornby's Arsenal devoted memoir *Fever Pitch* is bringing football fandom to the Union Chapel stage with a new opera, 25 years after the book was first published.

The north Londoner gave his blessing to Highbury Opera Theatre to develop it into an opera, saying he's "delighted" with the adaptation.

The plot follows the lead character Gooner through the ups and downs of supporting Arsenal, exploring the relationship of this mania to the rest of his life.

"He's a bit too obsessed with football; everything in his life is somehow tied to Arsenal. When Arsenal are winning, things are going well, but when Arsenal are losing, it seems like his life is falling apart," says Joanna Harries, one of the principal cast members, who plays all of the women in the production – that includes two girlfriends and a psychiatrist.

Alongside rehearsals and in preparation for the show, the cast and production team have been visiting local schools, introducing them to the music and letting them do some choreography of their own, before inviting them to special, slightly censored performances. (The chants have a fair bit of profanity.)

"Going to these kids' workshops for the emotion in there! Some of them are only seven, and the emotional connection, the way they related to what we were

Highbury Opera Theatre singer Joanna Harries tells **Zoe Paskett** about *Fever Pitch* the Opera based on Nick Hornby's memoir

bringing, you just have to mention football or Arsenal and there was an instant connection. Although," she adds, "there were some Chelsea fans and a couple of Spurs fans who were very vocal in their opposition!"

Harries is from Wales and now in her final year at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow, so she doesn't have any particular affinity to Arsenal herself.

"I remember going to the auditions and on the way I thought, oh god what if they ask me about football!? Should I have looked up the offside rule? Luckily, luckily it was not a problem, and most of the characters I play, know nothing about football or aren't interested in football.

"But I have learned quite a lot about football and also about being a fan. [*Fever Pitch*] is about Arsenal, but any football fan can relate to it, and actually anyone who has been so obsessed with something, everyone can relate to that."

Fever Pitch runs at the Union Chapel from September 22 to 24. unionchapel.org.uk



Joanna Harries, Robin Bailey, Nick Allen and Robert Gildon are the principal cast.

Pictures: CLAUDIA MARINARO



Robin Bailey and Joanna Harries in *Fever Pitch*.

event

Review

FIVE GUYS NAMED MOE Marble Arch Theatre

★★★★

A blast of jazz-hot fun combats the autumn chill, as New Orleans comes to Marble Arch.

A new circus tent-style theatre houses Clarke Peters' toe-tapping revival of his tribute to swing bandleader Louis Jordan – complete with bar serving Southern cocktails to keep the party going.

Plot wise, this jukebox musical is pretty threadbare. Nomax is drinking away the

blues after his wife left him when five guys named Moe burst out of his radio and liquor cabinet, here to offer relationship counselling through Jordan's songs.

But the show pre-emptively criticism, wryly acknowledging that the minimal dialogue just cues each number and apologising for the songs' chauvinism. If basically a retro gig, it's an irresistibly fun one, performed by a dynamic cast.

Dex Lee (Know Moe) has explosive elevation; Idriss Kargbo (Little Moe) does a great Carmen Miranda; Ian Carlyle

(Four-Eyed Moe) is a cheeky charmer; Horace Oliver (Big Moe) coolly authoritative. Emile Ruddock (Eat Moe) powerfully delivers "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Cryin'", and Edward Baruwa brings real desolation to Nomax.

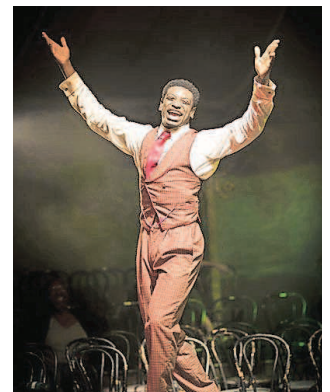
The second half, which visits the marvellously named Funky Butt Club, is packed with hits: "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie", "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens", "Let the Good Times Roll", "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?".

Andrew Wright's thrilling choreography complements

Jordan's witty, soulful and forward-looking music, which paved the way for mainstream R&B and rock n roll. The band is sensational, and takis supplies natty costing.

There's audience interaction (including a sing-along, conga line and surprise solo from Freddie Fox on press night), though more adventurous use could be made of the unusually flexible space, which features a ringed revolve and cabaret tables. But come for a jumpin' joint and a great night of music.

Marianka Swain



Dex Lee in *Five Guys Named Moe*.

Picture: HELEN MAYBANKS