

# 'Theatre can be diverse and accessible to everyone'

**Remember that famous part of The Jungle Book - you know the one - when Mowgli gets an iPad?**

Such a scene will play out at the Hen & Chickens Theatre tonight, as a teacher allows her class to invent modern twists on classic stories in a last resort to engage her students before their exams. High School English is a comedy, but the theme it addresses is serious: are we educating our children in the right way?

Tonight's show forms part of Theatre Festival Pending: a collection of work by emerging artists and actors with links to the East15 Acting School.

Sascha Green – together with Tom Sergeant and Valerie Christiansen – has produced the event, which started on Tuesday and runs until Saturday (April 20).

"The majority of those involved are not from the UK, so there's an international collaboration to the whole thing," she says.

"I'm from Australia, the other

two are from Canada and Scotland, then there are actors from the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Asia. I think this is an opportunity to bring the flavour of these different cultures (to the stage)."

Theatre Festival Pending incorporates six shows across its five-night run. Sergeant directs High School English (tonight and Saturday), while Green takes charge of The Mercy Seat (yesterday and Friday) and Christiansen oversees The Things That Were There (Tuesday and Saturday).

Each performed in the intimate setting of the Hen & Chickens, The Mercy Seat is about whether characters choose to be inherently selfish after the tragedy of 9/11, and The Things That Were There centres on the relationships of a family over many years. The latter is a new play by award-winning playwright David Greenspan.

"We find these characters in defining moments, bracing



Above: Rehearsals for Mercy Seat, Right: Sascha Green

themselves for an uncertain future," adds Green. "Their decisions pending; these moments will alter the course of their lives."

The team behind the festival have deliberately picked three very different stories "to show that theatre can be diverse and accessible to everyone – there's something for all to find in it," Green explains.

"It's something different. I know that people are always looking at

the West End and the big musicals – and the outrageous prices that go with them.

"There's something exciting about this theatre that's stripped back and intimate in a 50-seater, with up-and-coming artists who will be taking over the London theatres as they graduate in the next year."

**Dan Splarn**

**Hen & Chickens Theatre until April 20. Tickets: [unrestrictedview.co.uk](http://unrestrictedview.co.uk)**



## Review

### Three Sisters

Almeida Theatre

★★★★☆

**Fresh off Olivier Award wins for Summer and Smoke, director Rebecca Frecknall and actress Patsy Ferran reunite at the Almeida - bringing a similarly expressive approach to Chekhov as they did to Tennessee Williams.**

Rather than pianos, this time this stage is filled with chairs. As the Moscow-born siblings – stuck in the provincial garrison town where their late father was stationed – are gradually stripped of their hopes of escape, the stage is stripped bare, until (with a climactic flourish) their rural immersion is complete.

It's visually engaging, but slightly at odds with Cordelia Lynn's semi-update, which mixes the 1901 original's lyricism with frank modern vernacular.

The latter does pull the drama into contemporary experience, but makes the three-hour



Pearl Chanda, Ria Zmitrowicz, Shubham Saraf and Lois Chimimba in Three Sisters.

Picture: MARC BRENNER

production feel too verbose; the existential musing becomes repetitive, rather than revealing.

Most effective is the portrait of the central trio, who really

convince as bickering sisters – that push-pull of affection and exasperation, support and limitation.

Ria Zmitrowicz's Irina hates

being babied, but also hides under blankets; Pearl Chanda's Masha is marvellously stropic, then completely felled by first love; and Ferran's toiling Olga

always seems too young for whatever position of care is foisted upon her.

That arrested development (they still have 'Nanny') is well contrasted with Lois Chimimba's aggressive, ruthlessly practical sister-in-law Natasha.

There are strong turns too from Alan Williams' alcoholic doctor; Peter McDonald's eloquent Vershinin, yearning for a better future; and Elliot Levey's bumbling classics teacher, who – as he realises just how unhappy Masha is with him – switches from comic relief to stark despair.

There are striking moments – a rousing jig, lamp-lit intimacy, violent grief – but the production feels caught between traditional and daring.

The opening sequence expresses more in movement than much of Lynn's text; a more radical update might have given Frecknall and her excellent company more space to play.

**Marianka Swain**

**Three Sisters runs at Almeida Theatre until Saturday June 1**