

NEW WAYS AT THE NEW WOLSEY

David Edwards

Thirty years ago, Trevor Nunn laid the foundation stone for the new Wolsey Theatre in his home town of Ipswich, named after another famous 'old boy', Cardinal Wolsey. The theatre was built to replace the cramped Arts Theatre (scene of Ian McKellen's Henry V in 1963, and a rather less noteworthy appearance by myself three years later on a bicycle, dressed as a French priest, in *Irma la Douce*), a converted lecture hall, providing the town with repertory theatre since 1948. You can now enjoy two-meals-for-the-price-of-one on the stage itself at The Old Rep pub, the building's latest incarnation, and marvel at how they could have sustained a professional theatre in such a small space for so long.

During the intervening years, the new building – designed by Roderick Ham (Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead, Derby Playhouse) – has seen changing times. Under the Artistic Direction of Antony Tuckey, the Wolsey Theatre was regularly at the top of TMA's audience attendance tables, presenting a typical year-round repertory programme. Following Tuckey's retirement in 1997, the theatre's fortunes waned, and in 1999 the Wolsey was forced to close. However, following a rescue package spearheaded by the Arts Council and Ipswich Borough Council, and with the support of Suffolk County Council and the ever loyal Wolsey Theatre Club, the new team of Sarah Holmes (Chief Executive) and Peter Rowe (Artistic Director) was recruited, and the theatre re-opened as the New Wolsey in February 2001.

With the same level of funding available, Sarah and Peter were faced with a blank sheet, and a great deal of expectation. 'We had to find a new model that would provide Ipswich with a broad-based programme but within a more sustainable financial framework', says Sarah. 'The old repertory model was no longer sustainable at this scale of operation. Nor could it reflect the rich diversity of work that was available, but not being seen because of the way buildings were tied up with their own-produced work.' Another factor was the determination to serve a wider audience – 'It was clear that many of the town's residents had never been to the old theatre.'

The model adopted by the New Wolsey was to provide seasons that certainly included some home-produced work, but which also embraced collaborations with other companies and a wide range of touring work, supported by an energetic education and community programme. In the eight years since the theatre re-opened, the New Wolsey has proved that this format works, both by extending the diversity and accessibility of the programme, and by providing new opportunities for a wealth of regional, national and international artists. Engaging with a wide range of new audiences, whilst recognising the needs of its traditional audience, has been the central plank of the New Wolsey's audience development success.

The home-produced work has ranged from Arthur Miller to Alan Ayckbourn, and a regular feature of New Wolsey seasons has been Peter Rowe's signature actor-musician shows such as *Sugar*, *Blues in the Night*, and last season's *Little Shop of Horrors*. Each Christmas the theatre presents its own pantomime in the 'Rock 'n' Roll' style – each of the actors play one if not several instruments, delighting audiences with their versatility. Peter has accumulated a flexible company of actor-musicians, who are equally at home acting, singing or playing, even prepared to acquire new skills to augment the ensemble. The 2009 autumn programme begins with the world première of a musical adaptation of the much-loved movie starring James Stewart, *It's a Wonderful Life*. With music by Steve Brown (*Spend, Spend, Spend*), book and lyrics by Steve Brown and Francis Matthews, the New Wolsey is mounting the production in association with Avalon Promotions and Andrew Fell. With a cast of 17, plus two teams of 7 child actors and a band, it will be the largest production yet staged at the theatre. 'One of the most exciting things for our audiences is seeing a really big show in a 400-seat auditorium with an open apron stage', says Peter Rowe. 'Our limited wings and lack of flying require us to be inventive and imaginative with staging solutions, while the use of actor-musicians always creates a celebratory atmosphere for our musical work. Our audiences love seeing actors working so hard to please them!'

Collaborations with other companies have created new relationships and partnerships. Nationally renowned physical theatre company Gecko have re-located to become resident in Ipswich, and in a mutually beneficial arrangement are involved in projects with the newly created University Campus Suffolk. The New Wolsey offers them office accommodation at the nearby Studio, and shares technical expertise and admin support. Their production of *The Overcoat* was showcased at the theatre, prior to its further development and appearance at the Lyric, Hammersmith and Edinburgh Festival. Meanwhile, Peter Rowe has been running a training laboratory, working with performers with circus and aerial skills, which he aims to use as the basis for creating a new piece of theatre based on the Orpheus myth, working with an aerialist/choreographer and a composer. Other companies that work regularly with the New Wolsey include Analogue – a co-production of *Beachy Head* played at this year's Edinburgh Festival – and Doug Rintoul and Darren Johnston's *Transport*, whose *In a Dream Dreamt by Another* fuses textual and movement-based performance. Together, they are working on a project with Croatian playwright Tena Štivičić, researching the stories of immigrants with refugee status in local detention centres. 'One of the great bonuses from these collaborations is the way that it refreshes the organisation artistically,' says Peter. 'New companies with new ways of making work, new technologies and new techniques challenge our more orthodox process, and this leads naturally to cross-fertilisation and new forms of collaboration. Working with companies at the cutting edge of experimentation has helped to make the whole organisation more ambitious, flexible and dynamic.'

Including pantomime, the New Wolsey produces around four of its own shows each year, and will co-produce with three or four other companies. The rest of the season is touring work, which in the autumn of 2009 includes the Schtanhaus/Nuffield/Headlong production of *The Winter's Tale*, Spymonkey's *Moby Dick*, English Touring Theatre's widely acclaimed *The Hypochondriac*, and the Watermill's *Hot Mikado*, together with new work from Hoipolloi, LipService, Jonzi D and Company FZ. There is also music from the Adriano Adewale Group, children's theatre with Scamp's *Stick Man*, Stuff and Nonsense Theatre Company, *Story Box* and *Blunderbus*, and a comedy strand including Ennio Marchetto, *Fascinating Aida*, Sarah Millican, and a comedy evening solely for the under 18s – no adults allowed!

From its outset, the New Wolsey has been a co-producer on the Eclipse Theatre initiative, presenting adaptations of *Mother Courage*, *Three Sisters* and the world premières of Roy Williams' *Little Sweet Thing*, *Angel House* and most recently, Oladipo Agboluaje's adaptation of Kester Aspden's *The Hounding of David Oluwale*, directed by Dawn Walton. The commitment to diversity also includes the regular programming of Graeae. Last season the New Wolsey co-produced *Flower Girls*, co-directed by Peter Rowe and Jenny Sealey.

Attendances at this strand of programming, sadly, do not match the numbers attending some of the in-house work. 'I cannot deny that the nature of our programming does not please everyone,' says Sarah. 'When we re-opened in 2001, the theatre had been closed for a couple of years, and the regular audience who had been season ticket holders – disappointed season ticket holders, as it happens, following the last few seasons – were hungry to see what we were going to offer. I think some people were upset that we were not offering a similar pattern of work, but over time I believe we are wooing many of them back.' Head of Marketing, Andrew Burton, adds: 'What has been incredibly exciting is how, through the diversity of our programming, and the effectiveness of our marketing and outreach work, we have been able to attract a much wider audience to the New Wolsey over the past eight years, both in terms of age and cultural background.' In the first 18 months of trading, 70% of ticket buyers were not on the old company's database. Attendance overall is on an upward rising curve – percentage occupancy for New Wolsey's own shows rose to 86% last year, with attendance at visiting shows in the healthy 60s. And a survey carried out by Cultural Intelligence comparing 2007/08 data to baseline statistics from their opening season, showed, for example, that those describing their origin as Black or Black British had increased from just 1% to nearer 3%, in a community where the latest census information (from 2001) shows the town's demographic to be overwhelmingly (93.4%) white.

A direct result of the way the theatre programmes its work is that there is so much more on offer to audiences – around 240 performances a year in the main theatre, with no fewer than 52 different

titles to choose from. And this does not include the work presented as part of the New Wolsey's annual Pulse Fringe Festival, which fills the town for two-and-a-half weeks each summer with an amazing choice of performing and visual arts. Pulse not only showcases pre- and post-Edinburgh productions, but provides local and national small-scale companies opportunities to show work in progress, and played to 82% of capacity over some 35 events in 2009. This year, with ACE Grants for the Arts funding, Pulse featured six companies from the Arts Council's Escalator initiative, including These Colours, Nabokov, El Toro, Helix Dance, Axis of Evil Theatre Productions and Footprints – all for a fiver a ticket. Pulse is programmed by the New Wolsey's General Manager, Stephen Freeman. 'The quality and range of work presented in this year's festival far exceeded expectation,' says Steve. 'We received hundreds of applications, and the selection process was a very difficult one. We are very pleased with the success of Pulse this year, and will build on this success for its 10th anniversary next year!'

Creative Learning has always been a significant part of the New Wolsey offer, albeit in different forms. There is an established range of partners in schools, colleges and universities, in the community, and in other arts organisations, and the theatre has consistently delivered a series of positive interactions with an increasingly diverse participant base. However, the New Wolsey acknowledged the need to change in order to remain relevant, successful and future proof. Rob Salmon was appointed in Spring 2008 as Associate Director to initiate a new organisation-wide framework for participatory, learning and skills-based activity, using theatre as a catalyst to develop creativity, and with the aim of celebrating identity, contributing to positive change and increasing capacity alongside expertise.

Three interconnected initiatives are designed to provide a specific entry point for all skill levels and ages. Creative Education is a service for local and regional schools and colleges, delivering a wide range of work at all levels, including working with referral agencies to support the pre-NEET agenda. Creative Projects is an extensive programme of enrichment activities, extending the cultural agenda beyond the boundaries of the theatre building, with a specific focus on the personal, social and artistic development of young artists as positive and vital contributors to our society. Over 100 children, young people and young adults are now involved in six separate groups, one of which is led by a practitioner from Gecko. Part of this strand is the formation, with funding from ACE's Young People's Participatory Fund, of a Young Board. 'Our aim is to place the authentic voice of young people at the heart of the organisation', says Rob. 'They consult on programming, branding and ethos, as well as biscuits', he adds.

The third initiative is Creative Development, a platform for students, arts educators, practitioners and lifelong learners to gain new skills and share good practice. Springboard and Write Now provided opportunities for local adults to explore their potential as playwrights, the latter working with inmates from nearby Hollesley Bay Open Prison; both groups featured work in the Pulse festival. The New Wolsey will be one of the first theatres to create a post of Creative Apprentice within the Technical team.

Rob comments: 'The social agenda takes a clear and deliberate role in our work; however we are dedicated first and foremost to the delivery of high quality theatrical experiences that not only reflect the values of the New Wolsey Theatre, but also exploit what it has to offer.'

Aiming to future-proof Creative Learning, and embed it at the centre of the New Wolsey's work, has led to the next potential stage of the theatre's capital development. The theatre occupies a small footprint on the edge of the town centre, and also uses a converted chapel as a Studio a few hundred metres away. But if it is to maximise the ambitious plans in its Creative Learning programme, the New Wolsey needs more physical space, preferably space to which it has ready access, and which it can call its own. An opportunity has arisen in the sale of immediately adjacent land to a developer, and Sarah Holmes has been able to negotiate a deal with them and the Borough Council planners whereby under a Section 106 agreement, the developers will build and hand over the shell of an extension, that will provide much-needed additional accommodation, including a rehearsal room and increased workshop space. Unfortunately, the current recession has stopped the commercial development in its tracks. 'Until the developers can find a suitable anchor tenant to commit to the

site, our part of the project cannot get off the ground', ' says Sarah. 'However, we are continuing with our planning, including the development of a fundraising strategy, so that as soon as we get the green light, we can move'.

Despite the financial climate, and the uncertainty regarding the proposed capital development, the future looks positive for the New Wolsey. There is a sense of forward momentum, largely engendered by Sarah and Peter's energy and tenacity, augmented by Rob's vision for the development of creative learning, which has made the new model of working at the theatre so successful. Many of the staff that arrived back in 2001 are still in post, forming a fiercely loyal and dedicated team, while funding partners are committed to maintaining high quality theatre in Ipswich. The audience base is growing and expanding, and the creative learning aspirations will significantly enhance the existing programme to reach yet more people. The New Wolsey's collaborative approach – with funders, artists and audiences – has laid down firm foundations for a successful future.

DAVID EDWARDS

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