

Coming in October  
'Amongst Barbarians'

Directed by  
Sean Lippett  
3 – 11 October

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## 'Decade'

directed by Kirsty Elmer

Friday 18 - Saturday 26th July

***'I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I don't have a theory, that's wrong. Some accuse me of being a 9/11 truther and of having an agenda: I don't have an agenda. And I don't want to be a hero, I just want the truth.'***

'Decade' was originally conceived and developed by Headlong Theatre Company's directors, Rupert Goold and Robert Icke in 2011. Twenty contemporary writers were commissioned to explore the events and legacy of 9/11 to mark the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. Originally staged at St Katharine's Docks in London, this was a celebrated immersive production, which combined inventive set design with choreographed movement and ensemble performance.

What stood out immediately about this collection of plays was the quality of the writing and the variety of styles and approaches they embraced. It is a stunning collection of writing, creating fascinating characters, voices and stories. It's also a theatrical challenge; it's unlikely that I'd have chosen to direct it if it wasn't! And, of course, the subject matter itself: the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, and the subsequent consequences, which have become iconic and compelling within our own history. 9/11 is an event which we can all relate to; we remember where we were when we first heard the shocking news. We have all been witness to the countless images and footage of the attacks on the Twin Towers via the initial media response and the simultaneous growth of the internet and social media. But this play is not a sentimental

depiction of the events and their aftermath; it offers different human experiences and different perspectives, both real and imagined, whether these are of the day itself or its legacy years later.

In this production, we will be staging 14 of the plays in promenade, utilising all of the NVT theatre spaces and weaving together a range of intertwined stories. The rehearsal process has been incredible. I have been blessed with a team of talented ensemble actors whose commitment, risk-taking, trust and bravery I admire and am very thankful for. They willingly accepted this challenge with enthusiasm and determination. And, despite some of the more moving and emotional moments in the plays, we have had a lot of fun exploring characters and stories over the past few months. I can only urge you to see for yourself their hard work, creativity and talent.

As always, integral to my productions, my design team have been pivotal in helping to create a changing range of locations and atmospheres through sound, light and set. They have also accepted this challenge with determination and creativity in order to immerse the audience in the world of each story. This is no mean feat! My stage management team have also been crucial to this production, enabling the tapestry of stories to move fluently from space to space. Quite frankly, the play couldn't work without all of their attention to detail, organisation and teamwork!

'Decade' promises to be a thought-provoking, moving and memorable theatrical experience. We have really enjoyed the creative explorative process in crafting this production; we hope you have an unforgettable experience as our audience.

**Kirsty Elmer**



Photo by Jezz Bowden

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## From the Artistic Director

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The NVT Social on Saturday 7th of June proved to be a truly remarkable event. With many members arriving early to meet up in the bar beforehand, it was soon clear that there was much interest in what next season's productions would be. When everyone gathered in the Theatre Upstairs it was evident that it was an exceptional turn out. Not only was every seat in the house taken but people were practically hanging off the roof beams, with both aisles filled with people either standing or sitting on the steps. It was heartening to see our newly renovated auditorium so absolutely jam packed.

The Youth Theatre Group got the evening off to a good start with a showing of their fresh, and original version of 'Alice in Wonderland'. Although still work in progress, they exuded wit and charm, and it was good for us all, I think, to see the young actors, bright eyed with the theatre spark, acting with such confidence and clarity in front of such a large, appreciative audience.

Then came the announcement of the forthcoming plays and the roll call of next season's directors. With so many good proposals coming in, choosing has not been easy – but there will be a season after this for those who aren't directing this time round. The 2014/15 selection is intended to cover a wide spectrum of content and styles. Starting in the Studio with 'Amongst Barbarians' by Michael Wall, directed by Sean Lippett – a modern, volatile piece that manages to treat the seriousness of being on Death Row in Malaysia with an extraordinarily effective and robust humour - which will be in sharp contrast to our second show, in the Theatre Upstairs, Noel Coward's 'Hay Fever', a brilliantly light 1920's comedy that has Coward's humour at its fizzing best. This will be directed by Gerry McCrudden. We follow this with our own 'home grown' Christmas show, a new take on Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Snow Queen', adapted and written by Andrew Allen. For 2015 there will be an exciting version of 'Hamlet', directed by Steven

O'Shea, followed by 'Benefactors' by Michael Frayn, directed by Tess Gill, 'The Thrill of Love' by Amanda Whittington, directed by Pat Boxall, 'Parlour Song' by Jez Butterworth, directed by Claire Lewis, 'The Arsonists' by Max Frisch. directed by Mark Green and finally the 'Ten Minute Play Competition'. There will be more details about all these later productions in future Newsletters. As each director took to the stage to introduce themselves and talk briefly about their production, whether they were familiar to us or new to NVT but experienced elsewhere, they all received an enthusiastic reception. Afterwards the mood of excitement continued as everyone mixed down in the bar, with discussions springing up everywhere.

There's not space here to mention the many other additions to the season – performed readings, workshops, 'one offs' and so on - these are still being discussed. Finally I'd like to sign off with an appreciative salute to the fine work that NVT has already achieved this season. Not forgetting 'Decade' which is still to come. which will bring powerful drama not only to both theatre spaces but also to the South Hall. This is to be followed by NVT's very special production for Gay Pride Weekend – the much requested return of 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch'. So, if you missed it first time round or if you want to see it again, this is your chance... book early!

Looking forward to next season one thing is for sure; with all the auditions and rehearsals, and all the creative and front of house teams at full throttle, our old NVT building will once again be buzzing... and so be it!

**Rod Lewis**

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## 2014/15 Season Productions

Our 67<sup>th</sup> season will start in October 2014, below are the productions we have planned for the season. Some production dates are still to be finalised and one further production to be confirmed. You can find more up-to-date details on the NVT website!

**Amongst Barbarians** by Michael Wall *Director Sean Lippett (Studio)*

**Hay Fever** by Noel Coward *Director Gerry McCrudden (Upstairs)*

**The Snow Queen** by Hans Christian Anderson *Adapted/directed by Andrew Allen (Upstairs)*

**Hamlet** by Shakespeare *Adapted and directed by Steven O'Shea (Studio)*

**Benefactors** by Michael Frayn *Directed by Tess Gill (Studio)*

**The Thrill of Love** by Amanda Whittington *Directed by Pat Boxall (Upstairs)*

**Parlour Song** by Jez Butterworth *Directed by Claire Lewis (Studio)*

**The Arsonists** by Max Frisch *Directed by Mark Green (Studio)*

**Ten Minute Play Competition**

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## From 'The Stage' Columns

### "Don't underestimate amateur theatre as a source of training"

By Susan Elkin

Published Monday, June 16, 2014

[www.thestage.co.uk/columns](http://www.thestage.co.uk/columns)



Pied Pipers' Guys and Dolls in Cambridge. Photo: Timothy Winn

I recently interviewed Arts Ed-trained Nathan Wright, a young actor who's doing well and has just come out of an eighteen month stint in BBC's Doctors. In passing he told me that he had cut his teeth and firmly established his determination to be an actor by taking part in amateur drama alongside his grandfather in Dudley where he comes from. And that set me thinking, not exactly for the first time, about the training power, strength and potential of amateur drama which is usually undervalued or even sneered at.

If you're young and single-minded, as Wright was, then you need to take part in as much theatre as you can. That includes school plays, youth theatre and anything which is going on in your community such as amateur drama, including musical theatre.

Most of the groups I know and see in action now hold open auditions. That means that actors from all walks of life, experience and ability are often attracted from quite a distance – which helps to keep a non-pro company's work fresh and lively. More often than not, these days that includes professionally trained actors and singers because far too many of these have no paid work and are happy to perform with amateur groups simply to keep their theatrical muscles in trim – it's better to be on stage than not. From a community point of view it's a real gain because it raises the game of the non-professionals in the group as everyone learns from each other.

Companies often import and pay a professional director too and that makes sure that the work is done along the same lines as it would be in pro group even though it takes place in the evenings after the day job. Chris Cuming, who trained at Central and works as a professional mentor there, for example, is directing Cambridge Operatic Society's Oklahoma in November, having also done the company's South Pacific last year. Also in Cambridge, Pied Pipers recently presented a fine account of Guys and Dolls at ADC Theatre in the city. Only last month I saw, in London, the Geoids production of Little Shop of Horrors directed by Italia Conti-trained agent, James Foster. And I'm looking forward to Gillingham Drama Society's Hairspray at Hazlitt Maidstone in the autumn. Their shows are directed in a very accomplished and professional way too. And the upshot of all this from a training point of view is that some of the professional training rubs off on those who haven't had it directly.

"Amateur" theatre has a quaint and outdated image and that connotation-laden moniker "AmDram" sums it up. There is some fine work going on in many of these companies and a great deal of collaborative learning so it's a real training environment, not least because the boundaries between amateur and professional have become so blurred in recent years. Let's just remember that at base the only real difference is that amateurs do it, literally, for the love of it and professionals are paid – or should be. I prefer to refer to it as non-commercial theatre, actually.



# 'The Herbal Bed'

by Peter Whelan  
directed by Tamsin Fraser  
20 – 28 June 2014

## Review by Barrie Jerram

Peter Whelan's fascinating and multi-layered play is based on actual facts. Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna Hall, is accused of adultery with Rafe Smith, a family friend. Her husband, a respected doctor, urges her to sue for slander and restore their good names.

It is a tale of passion, loyalty and religion centring on Susanna, an intelligent and independent woman living in a loveless marriage that puts her second to her husband's work and dedication. Love has gone sour in Rafe's marriage. His wife's mental state is in decline following the loss of their two children. Each senses the sadness in the other and love secretly blossoms between them. It almost becomes consummated in circumstances that lead to the accusation. What follows shows that being economical with the truth is not a modern exercise and that skin saving lying is not the prerogative of politicians only.

The writing mixed moral debate with a goodly help-



Constance Starns and Red Gray

ing of humour and offered meaty parts for the actors. All rose to the challenge with no dud performances.

As Susanna, Red Gray gave a mesmerising performance that conveyed the duality of the character - outwardly an angelic soul nurturing forbidden passion within. Her eyes and glances told a different story to her spoken words. They oozed love for Rafe whilst her body maintained a modest demeanour. Her transformation to a creature of sexuality in the night scene was stunning as was the way she took control of the ensuing situation. She became the puppet master over her lover and husband.

Sarah Charsley's Hester, the servant, was a delightful piece of characterisation - a simple soul full of

unrequited love for Rafe, yet feisty in defending it. After aiding her mistress by lying she got to deliver the funniest line in the play.

Rafe, in Warren Saunders hands, is basically a simple and honest man with a strong sense of conscience that threatens to wreck all their lives. His torment was well conveyed as he tried to reconcile his love with the shame of betraying his friendship with Dr Hall.



Simon Messingham, Red Gray, Sarah Charsley and Alistair Lock

Simon Messingham played John Hall, the dedicated doctor who knows and accepts his wife's unfaithfulness as long as it is never openly acknowledged. Such acknowledgment would destroy his position and life's work. To protect this he goes along with the cover up. Hall's portrayal was a sympathetic one and, again, one whose facial expressions spoke volumes as it gave away the realisation and anguish of his natural honesty being corrupted.

Comedy came from Jay Chappell as Jack Lane, the swaggering womaniser whose behaviour belies his position as part of the local gentry. His posturing and drunken behaviour certainly amused the audience.



Gerry McCrudden and Simon Messingham

Gerry McCrudden turned in a nice cameo as Bishop Parry with a perfectly judged amount of benignness - a characteristic that was totally alien to his Vicar General, Goche. In this role Alistair Lock almost

Photos by Strat Mastoris

stole the show with his chilling and, at times, hilarious portrayal of the man's overzealous piety and puritanical loathing of the gentry. This was seen at its best during the cross examination scene.

Young Constance Starns played the role of the Hall's daughter, Elizabeth, at the performance I attended – the role was shared with Cordelia Brand. Child actors can irritate with pretentiousness but not so Miss Starns. She had a sweetness that did not cloy and gave the part a most natural feel.



Jay Chappell and Sarah Charsley

Tamsin Fraser's direction was sensitive, unobtrusive and finely balanced the comedy with the dramatic action. She was supported by a creative team that enhanced the production with a most realistic set, excellent music and sound effects. The simple lighting changes that enable the scene to move to Worcester Cathedral were most effective and deserve a special mention.

## Thoughts on 'The Herbal Bed' by Strat Mastoris

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There's an exchange near the very beginning of 'The Herbal Bed' which sets out the opposing philosophies that form the play's foundation. Bishop Parry has come to visit Doctor Hall's home and is looking at the 'physic' garden. "So these are the herbs that have the power to save life. I think you're close to God in your herb garden, doctor, for where else would you see such a demonstration of His strength than the way He's distilled it into these wisps of flowers and slender stems down to the very roots"

The doctor is careful to agree - "I'm very conscious of the hand of God in my work, my lord" - although a few lines later he continues - "but that underlines the need for accurate measurement of the quantities and the correct balance with other ingredients... then it can be extremely beneficial".

Accurate measurement. Scientific measurement and experimentation. The intellectual tools of scientists and philosophers like Copernicus, Kepler and Francis Bacon, whose abandonment of a medieval worldview started the Enlightenment. The Bishop asks if the doctor can prescribe something for 'a choleric humour' - he's still living with the classical Greek theories of Aristotle. Doctor Hall offers him a mixture of eleven different herbs - "we use many so that the body can choose those that it needs". The Enlightenment mission is to experiment, to see what works, not to rely on established dogma.

On the surface 'The Herbal Bed' is a story of passion and forbidden love, culminating in a tense legal drama that grips us till the last lines. Actually, though, I think it's about the birth of modern thought. Peter Whelan has very cleverly balanced his cast to give us both sides of that development. Of the seven adult characters, four of them have their eyes firmly fixed on the past.

The Bishop we've already seen, with his 'choleric humours'. Jack Lane, who's come to study with Doctor Hall, is the son of a nobleman, obsessed with his feudal status as a 'gentleman' and unable to apply himself to the rigour of the scientific method. Barnabus Goche, the Bishop's Vicar-General, is firmly set in a medieval world. His sin-obsessed religion is probably the most fundamentalist of them all.

The sin, of course, is that of carnality - sex. Rafe Smith and Doctor Hall's wife Susanna are both trapped in loveless marriages, and are drawn together out of a need for intimacy and sexual fulfilment. Rafe acknowledges his passion for Susanna, but he can't escape the Church's moral universe. Rafe is torn - his sexual nature held on a tight leash by the strict authority of religion. Freud would have said 'by his Superego', although he wouldn't say that for another three hundred years.

Susanna's different, though. She wants sex with Rafe, but she also understands humanity's complex makeup. And she wants more. She wants knowledge - "when he's away I do secret things. Read his books, learn Latin, work the furnace..." She's a prototype feminist, really; she respects her husband as a person, but - "I partly married him out of a fascination for medicine. In place of love he's let me learn a little of his art".

John Hall himself is a very modern figure. He believes in the scientific method, and in the value of physical lives as opposed

to souls. But he's also quite political - he will say what's appropriate to those in power, and he will also choose to ignore his wife's affair and go to court to clear her name, if doing so will save his medical practice from ruin. As Susanna says to Rafe - "He knows and mustn't know. He wants our silence". He knows and mustn't know - this is the Doublethink of '1984' - a twentieth century concept. Rafe Smith is still stuck in the middle ages - "My thoughts are between me and God".

Probably the most modern character of all, though, is Hester the maid. She's able to sideline her own yearnings for Rafe Smith to support her mistress' alibi, but she's quite capable of usurping her status to attack Susanna woman to woman - "You took him! And damn you for it!" She gets away with this defiance because Susanna needs her compliance, and she will be rewarded by being treated more as a friend than as a servant. At the end, she perjures herself to save the family's reputation and the doctor's practice - "I saw God... up in the roof. I could see that he wanted me to lie".

Maybe she did. Maybe she didn't. To me she sounds like a political spin-doctor, and a fair proportion of our twenty-first century audience found that line hilarious. 'The Herbal Bed' may be set in the seventeenth century, but it was written in 1996 and both Hester and Susanna come out with phrases that could have been scripted by Alastair Campbell.

## 'Decade' on Indiegogo



Our production of Decade is looking to raise additional funds to help them make the production an experience to end the season.

Check out their crowdfunding page on Indiegogo - [igg.me/at/decade](http://igg.me/at/decade)

Your help will be greatly appreciated.

## 'Hedwig' Returns With Pride

After its success in the Fringe, our production of Hedwig and the Angry Inch is to return for just 4 performances over Pride Weekend! Booking will open soon.

Whether you saw it before or not, don't miss out seeing it this time, it will be great.



# Tickets for the next NVT production

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Just add the *Find and Remind toolbar* to your browser so that you don't miss an opportunity to donate.

The NVT has many drains on its finite resources, the maintenance of the building as well as improvements to the infrastructure and the ongoing refurbishment of the Theatre Upstairs.

## Our Sponsors

Our sponsorship deal is £250 for a year's advertising on our website and in our brochure, newsletter and show programmes, plus 2 free tickets for each production in that year

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