

"Shakespeare, the Actor's Friend"

The Toast of Sinéad Cusack at the Vic-Wells Shakespeare Party 2014



The Vic-Wells Association celebrated the 450th birthday of William Shakespeare recently with the regular annual party at the Old Vic.

The guest of honour was Sinéad Cusack, who was appearing there in the play *Other Desert Cities*, and kindly found time between the matinee and evening performances to attend the party and propose the toast to William Shakespeare. In a witty and amusing speech, she talked of her early roles in Shakespeare's plays. She claimed that as a young actress from the depths of rural Ireland, she was so in awe of Shakespeare's work that her early performances were rigid with reverence. Those members of the audience who had seen her many appearances in the London theatre, particularly those who had just seen her sensational performance in *Other Desert Cities*, were quite unconvinced!





Theatre in the Round and *Other Desert Cities*

Reviewed by Marjory Agha

The last Old Vic “in-the-round” production I saw was *Dancing at Lughnasa* and I wasn’t impressed. The rural Irish setting, for some reason, didn’t work “in-the-round”. However the staging of *Other Desert Cities* was, for me, an extraordinary theatrical experience. This was because I was sitting directly in front of the stage focal point – the drinks cabinet. This placed me, literally, within touching distance of the actors, almost uncomfortably, intimately close to their every minute gesture.

This up close and personal view was a perfect position to watch John Robin Baitz’s dissection of a high-powered, dysfunctional, political family during the Regan era. Each family member has a different account of a tragic incident – making “whose truth is it?” a central theme. Commanding the stage was Sinead Cusack as the prejudiced, abrasive mother. This was balanced by Peter Egan’s excellent portrayal as the tight, restrained father. And Clare Higgins delivered a sympathetic portrayal of the selfish, manipulative alcoholic sister/aunt. The story revolves round the daughter’s determination to publish her version of events, irrespective of the fall-out. This is a hot house of family intrigue, betrayal and secrets and the tension builds up to the devastating, unexpected revelation at the end. This was a night at the theatre that I won’t forget.



The Old Vic “in the round”

Photo by Matt Humphrey

(See also page 7)

The First World War and the Old Vic

by Liz Shafer

At the end of June, on Radio 3, David Owen Norris is doing a series of short 'drive-time' programmes on music during the First World War. One programme will be looking at what was going on at the Old Vic during what was actually an important period of expansion and consolidation. Two years before the war started Lilian Baylis's beloved aunt Emma Cons died and Baylis assumed complete control of the theatre. Baylis immediately applied for a new licence for the Vic so that operas could legitimately be staged there. Before that only costume recitals were allowed. These 'costume recitals' occupied an entire evening and were in effect musical highlights from the operas concerned - but a curtain would come crashing down after each song to break continuity and make sure the performance could not be mistaken for an unlicensed full production.

WW1 Repertoire

The operas that featured in these costume recitals became the mainstay of the Old Vic's World War 1 repertoire but only a few of these are still popular: Bizet's *Carmen* and Verdi's *Rigoletto* are still around but how about Balfe's *Rose of Castille*? Or the so-called 'English Ring' - Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, Wallace's *Maritana*, and Benedict's *The Lily of Killarney*? Gounod's *Faust* was a great favourite as was Auber's *Fra Diavolo* and the double bill of 'Cav and Pav', that is, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. There was an emphasis on 'ballad operas', which had formed the basis of Baylis's own repertoire in her earlier career as a professional musician, when she performed in London and later South Africa in the 1890s as part of a concert party called the Gypsy Revellers (think ribbons, banjos and tambourines).

"it was very much in the danger zone"

Community Spirit

But what were the Vic performances actually like? They were low budget, slightly ramshackle, 'it will be all right on the night' affairs. They were performed on bareboards sets. The costumes were makeshift. The performers were mostly amateur and Baylis would round up singers from local church choirs when she needed to. What is now the entrance of the Old Vic housed the Pearce and Plenty café,

which served food and drink right through the performances. The noise from Pearce and Plenty mixed with the racket from the market outside in the Cut to create a very variable soundscape during matinees. It doesn't sound very promising but Baylis got audiences in for opera throughout the War despite the Zeppelin raids - the theatre's proximity to Waterloo Station meant it was very much in the danger zone - and during raids



A Zeppelin flies over Central London during WW1

audiences usually stayed put whilst the performances continued despite the additional 'noises off'. The Vic operas attracted a big local audience to the theatre and even if there was a sing-a-long-with-Bizet element, especially in the gallery, the Vic was helping build community spirit in very tough times.

News from the Old Vic

Kevin Spacey, who has led the Old Vic as artistic director since 2004, will hand over the reins of the company to veteran stage director Matthew Warchus in autumn 2015. Warchus is a versatile director whose stage productions have run the gamut between prestige dramas and family-friendly musicals.



Matthew Warchus

He won a Tony Award for directing Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage*, which was seen in London, New York and Los Angeles. His other directing credits include the musical *Matilda*, which is currently on Broadway and the revival of Alan Ayckbourn's trilogy *The Norman Conquests*, which was seen at the Old Vic and on Broadway. Warchus is currently an artistic associate at the Old Vic. He directed Spacey and Jeff Goldblum in David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* in 2008.

Warchus' appointment comes amid a changing of the guard at three other prestigious theatre companies in London. Rufus Norris will become artistic director of the National Theatre starting in April 2015, succeeding Nicholas Hytner. Rupert Goold recently took over as artistic director of the Almeida Theatre, succeeding Michael Attenborough. In 2012, Gregory Doran was named artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Under Spacey, the Old Vic has seen its international profile rise with productions such as a touring version of Shakespeare's *Richard III* starring Spacey, and other revivals. Kevin Spacey has recently appeared in the one-man play *Clarence Darrow* at the Old Vic.

The Crucible

From 21 June to 13 September, Richard Armitage stars in Arthur Miller's classic American drama about the Salem witch trials which draws parallels with his experience of McCarthy's anti-communist investigations in the 1950s. This new production is brought to life by internationally acclaimed director Yaël Farber.

The Crucible tells the story of one man's fight to save his identity in a repressive Puritan community where intolerance collides with lust and superstition, fuelling widespread hysteria with tragic results. Miller's timeless parable attacks the evils of mindless persecution and the terrifying power of false accusations. This is the third play in a new season of productions which are presented in-the-round at The Old Vic.

Richard Armitage's credits include the forthcoming film *Into the Storm*. Other film and TV credits include *The Hobbit* trilogy, *Captain America* and *Spooks*. Theatre includes *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Macbeth* for the RSC.



Richard Armitage *The Crucible*
Photo by Jay Brooks

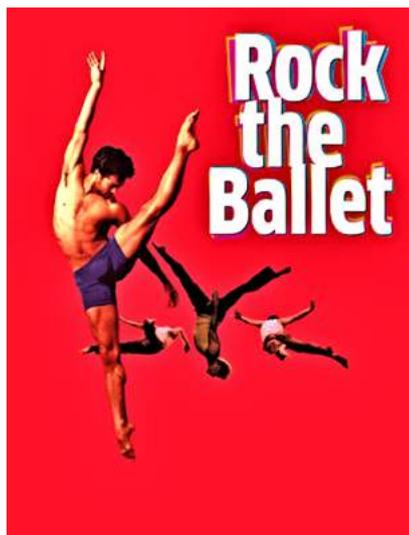


Kristin Scott Thomas

Electra

Director Ian Rickson and Kristin Scott Thomas reunite to bring Sophocles' tragedy to The Old Vic in the round from 20 September to 20 December 2014. Frank McGuinness delivers a charged adaptation of the classic drama of *Electra* and Orestes' revenge on their father's murderers.

Summer at Sadler's Wells 2014



Rasta Thomas' *Rock the Ballet*, starring the Bad Boys of Dance makes its London debut after taking the USA, Australia and Europe by storm. Hailing from New York, *Rock the Ballet* is a fusion of classic ballet techniques blended with the excitement of musical theatre, hip hop, tap, acrobatics and more.

The charismatic, high voltage virtuoso dancers perform to a backdrop of animated scenery and stadium rock lighting with a soundtrack of some of rock and pop music's biggest hits, including LMFAO, Queen, Usher, Kanye West and Coldplay.

Having enjoyed a successful career in ballet, dancing for companies including the Imperial Russian Ballet and the Joffrey Ballet, Rasta Thomas has pushed the boundaries of dance and created his own genre that appeals not only to seasoned ballet lovers but also to all dance fans and theatre-goers alike.

The talent, agility and skill of the dancers united with exciting, fresh choreography, theatrical presentation and contemporary music confirms *Rock the Ballet's* critically acclaimed influence on the dance experience. On at the Peacock Theatre from 10th – 28th June.

The exuberance and energy of Brazil returns to Sadler's Wells as 35 performers from Rio de Janeiro bring alive the spirit that makes Brazil so unique in the smash hit *Brasil Brasileiro*. Famed for its sizzling, feel-good dance heritage, this is a country where the musical culture of Africa and Europe merge with dance to create the infectious rhythms of samba.

From its beginnings as a ritualistic love dance to the excitement of a modern day Rio street carnival, *Brasil Brasileiro* features a live band, and shows samba in all its forms: from the lightning footwork of the forro to the agility of capoeira and the gloomy moves of batucada, taking you on a dance journey across this magical country.

Conceived and directed by Claudio Segovia (*Tango Argentino, Black and Blue, Flamenco Puro*) this stunning celebration of Brazilian dance is the perfect summer entertainment. On at Sadler's Wells from 8th – 27th July.



Hofesh Shechter

KnowBody; A lifetime of experiences is an evening of work created as part of Sadler's Wells Elixir Festival. The programme features the legendary artists Mats Ek and Ana Laguna, Sadler's Wells' Company of Elders performing a restaged excerpt from Hofesh Shechter's *In your rooms* and a new commission performed by a group of former professional dancers, some of whom are returning to the stage after 20 years or more.

From the beauty and power of a single gesture to the juxtaposition of electronic music and contemporary choreography performed by older dancers, *KnowBody* will challenge preconceptions and present contemporary dance illuminated by a lifetime of experience. On at Sadler's Wells from 12th – 13th September 2014.

Booking Fees: a polemic

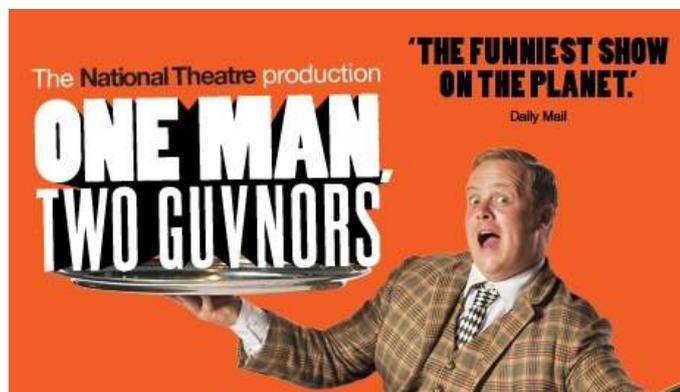
by Liz Shafer

I have just clobbered a friend of mine who was unguarded enough to mention she was going shopping in Woking. Why? Well I want to see the National Theatre's production of *One Man, Two Guvnors* which is now on tour. I've seen it before and thought it brilliant, a consummate display of farce theatre at its best. But the nearest tour venue is the Victoria Theatre Woking and that means BOOKING FEES like you wouldn't believe. So I worked out a cunning plan. I was on my way to the Globe and I called in at the NT to book my tickets. No good. The NT can't book for their own production in Woking. Plan B. Knowing that the Victoria theatre is part of the Ambassadors Theatre Group (ATG), I tried another of their theatres that I was passing later on. No good. At the Lyceum theatre you can only book for *The Lion King*. Now there is plenty of comment online about the astronomical booking fees charged by the ATG. Sarah Millicam even refused to perform at any theatre owned by ATG when she toured in 2012. I am clearly not the only person stunned by the stratospheric booking fees but what I find most irritating of all is that if you do all the work yourself – book online, print out the tickets on your paper, using your ink etc. - you still get hit with the same charges per ticket plus an overall transaction fee. How on earth can ATG justify this?

“Why should I be paying rip off booking fees for a production I have already subsidised?”

They explain that:

ATG Tickets uses this income to cover the cost of services related to running a ticketing operation including providing a contact centre, customer services, technology and developing new services. Transaction Fee - this fee covers the cost of processing bookings including delivery costs or arrangement for collecting tickets from the box office. A portion of the revenue generated by charging these fees helps ATG remain profitable and is invested in running theatres across the UK and worldwide, and producing new shows.



If I booked 4 tickets to see *One Man, Two Guvnors* at Woking it would cost me a £2.85 transaction fee plus £2.90 a ticket. Four of us are going so this is £14.45 extra. I might even be prepared to swallow this exorbitant surcharge if the show were some big, glossy, blatantly commercial enterprise but this is the NT. My taxes have helped this show get up and running. Why should I be paying rip off booking fees for a production I have already subsidised?

So I asked my friend to book the tickets for me when she went shopping in Woking. And instead of handing over just under £15 to ATG we're going to knock back a rather nice Chardonnay together instead.

E-Mail "Rehearsals" List - Note from the Vic-Wells' Secretary

The e-mail rehearsals list has been updated.

The first two "circulars" to use the revised list were sent out on May 18th and June 2nd, and concerned the Akram Khan rehearsal. This note is just to check that nobody has been missed out.

If you did not receive these two e-mails, you are no longer on the list.

If you want to be restored to the e-mail list, please contact me (Richard Reavill) on vicwells@tiscali.co.uk If you were not previously on the list, and would like to receive information about rehearsals and other Vic-Wells events, please let me know.

Other Desert Cities

Reviewed by Richard Reavill



Martha Plimpton and Clare Higgins in *Other Desert Cities* Photo: Johan Persson

I managed to make it to the very *last* performance of *Other Desert Cities*! For this production, the Old Vic had re-jigged into its “theatre-in-the-round” mode, which is a very clever adaptation of a traditional proscenium theatre. For those that have not seen this configuration, which was used for a number of shows a couple of years ago, (including Alan Ayckbourn’s *The Norman Conquests*), the action is based in a small circular area of the front stalls. The centre and rear stalls and both circles remain available to the audience, and two tiers of seating are built on the stage to replace those lost in the stalls. The arrangement is not so much “in-the-round” as “in-the-peanut-shell-shape”. The vast majority of the audience is in one area, a significant minority sit on the former stage, directly facing the body of the

theatre. Just a few sit at the two remaining sides. This is not totally satisfactory, as it does not quite make the perfect circle of audience which theatre in the round aficionados advocate. Theatre in the round does not quite convince me, as the actors have to perform the play to one-another, not to focus it in the direction of the audience as in a proscenium theatre, or generally in the direction of the audience as in a theatre with a thrust stage. However natural this might be, it has its limitations as a theatrical form.

But enough of all this technical stuff, what about the play? It is by American dramatist Jon Robin Baitz, and is tautly directed by Lindsey Posner. Why is it called *Other Desert Cities*? Well the play is set in Palm Springs, California, and if you head south on the freeway, the signage will offer you Palm Springs, or Other Desert Cities. It features an affluent American family, having a pre-Christmas reunion in the parents’ plush Palm Springs home, and going into melt-down when the daughter reveals that she is going to publish a book exposing aspects of the family’s past which the other family members would prefer not to be made public. In an excellent team of five, Peter Egan plays her father, an actor turned diplomat, who is appalled by her disloyalty, and Sinead Cusack turns in a formidable performance as his right-wing Republican political wife. Clare Higgins is the wife’s sloppy sister, recently returned from a serious fall off the wagon, who urges that truth should be told, but Daniel Lapaine as the son, points out that they all have a slightly distorted view of the past. Martha Plimpton, in a West End debut, plays the daughter whose book is the focus of the drama, and who demonstrates characteristics and behaviour that show that she is a chip off the old block of her mother.



The play is intense and dramatic, the characters believable if not very sympathetic, and it is often very funny. The background of American politics might make it a little easier for the audiences across the pond, and the final revelation at the end of the play is not entirely convincing. The “in-the-round” format works well for this piece, (except in the short final scene), as it helps focus on the intense personal interactions of the characters. Those seated too far back in the main part of the auditorium would be somewhat short-changed, while those in the further parts of the Upper Circle might be, like the P G Wodehouse character, “*if not disgruntled, far from being grunted*”.

WHAT'S ON



Sadler's Wells, Rosebery Avenue, London EC1R 4TN

Phone: 0844 871 0090

Main Theatre ** UK Premieres

- 17 - 18 June Dada Masila
- 20 - 21 June Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre ①
- 23 - 24 June Eastman - Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui - 4D
- 28 - 29 June Playlist
- 01 - 04 July Nederlands Dance Theatre - *Sehnsucht / Schmetterling*
- 5 July Step LIVE!
- 08 - 27 July Brasil Brasileiro ①
- 12 - 15 Sept. Elixir Festival - *KnowBody*
- 17 - 20 Sept. Mark Baldwin & Ladysmith Black Mambazo - *INALA*
- 24 - 27 Sept. Royal Swedish Ballet - *Mats Ek's Juliet & Romeo*** ②
- 01 - 04 Oct. Grupo Corpo - *Triz & Parabelo*
- 08 - 11 Oct. New Adventures & Re: Bourne - *Lord of the Flies* ③
- 14 - 18 Oct. Birmingham Royal Ballet - *Beauty and the Beast / Shadows of War*

Lilian Baylis Studio

- 02 - 03 Oct. Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir (Iceland)
- 10 - 11 Oct. Maija Hirvanen - *For those who have time*

Peacock Theatre ③

Portugal Street, Kingsway, London WC2A 2HT

- 02 - 05 July New English Ballet Theatre - *Tryst: Devotion & Betrayal* **
- 19 - 27 July Mummenschanz
- 16 Sept. - 4 Oct. The 7 Fingers - *Sequence 8*
- 07 - 25 Oct. Ballet Revolución



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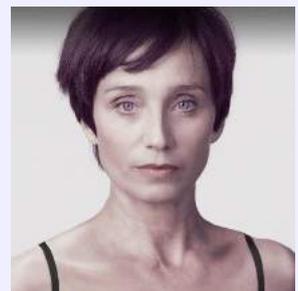


RICHARD ARMITAGE

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0844 871 2628

21 June - 13 September 2014
*Arthur Miller's **The Crucible***

22 September - 20 December 2014
*Sophocles' **Electra** - a version by Frank McGuinness*



KRISTIN SCOTT THOMAS

Don't forget that
Vic-Wells Association
Annual Subscriptions
 become due for payment
 on **JULY 1st**.
PLEASE RENEW PROMPTLY!

The Vic-Wells Association
 Founded in 1923 by Lilian Baylis CH

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Copy deadline for the next issue of *The Broadsheet* is **Saturday, 16th August**. Items or letters for publication should be sent to **The Editor** by this date.