

Coming next
month
**"Breaking
The Code"**
by
Hugh Whitmore
Directed by
Suzie Dole
27 March - 3 April

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Brighton BN1 2PT
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NEW VENTURE
T H E A T R E

THEATRE
NEW WRITING
CLASSES

Dancing at Lughnasa

By Brian Friel

Directed by Gerry McCrudden

20 – 27 February 2010

Remember "It's A Wonderful life"? Well, Gerry's back! Back to a period he loves - the 1930's. And there is a radio as well - again! "Dancing at Lughnasa" is an award-winning play and a modern classic - an Olivier in London and a Tony in NYC as Best Play in 1991. Brian Friel is an accomplished and master story teller.

Mike Stubbs

"Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary."

"There is no doubting we are in the thrall of as masterly a dramatist as the theatre possesses."

This was how The Times described Brian Friel. In 'Dancing at Lughnasa' Friel's great gifts as a master storyteller come to the fore as an apparent tale of the mundane changes into something quite different. Friel populates the stage with wonderful characters and events - which 'in that memory - atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory'. We ask you to sit, watch and listen to a deeply moving story.

It is 1936 and harvest time in Donegal. In a house just outside the village of Ballybeg live the five Mundy sisters, barely making ends meet. The two male members of the household are; their brother Jack, a missionary

priest, repatriated from Africa by his superiors and young Michael - the seven year old child of the youngest sister. A series of events and revelations give a sense that the life the women have known since childhood is

In their lives are three men - a brother - a son and a lover. These are pivotal relationships and the men are very much part of the ménage - but each in their own way can only observe the relationship between the women.



Photo by Strat Mastoris

L-R Amy Holmes as Chris, Sarah Davies as Maggie and Charlotte Grimes as Rose

about to be torn apart. The relationship between the five sisters dominates the story. They love and support each other but their constant proximity and their circumstances creates its own tensions. But loyalty and affection remain key.

In setting the story against the backdrop of the Lughnasa festival - with its ancient pagan origins - Friel evokes not simply the interior condition of a group of human beings trapped in their domestic situation - but the wider more ancient

Continued on page 2

Chairman? .. Community Theatre? ...



SHOULD we have a Chairman? SHOULD we transform NVT into a Community Theatre?

Three more opinions inside.

'Dancing at Lughnasa - continued from page 1

landscape, Christian and pagan, of which they are very much a part.

I first directed *Dancing at Lughnasa* well nigh on 16 years ago at the National Theatre of Kenya. Brian Friel personally arranged for us to be given the rights for the African premiere. As I recall this may also have been the first amateur production anywhere as well. But that memory might be illusory on my part! Given the African sub plot it was interesting to see how an African audience also closely identified with the story. Coming back to the script these many years later the text remains vivid and fresh. It is a cracking good yarn.

Friel adds an unusual element to the telling of this story – that of

dance. This is by no means a musical but by the device of an erratic Marconi radio he uses three events which involve some dancing. Woven into the text are a couple of popular dance tunes of the period and a thumping Irish dance number which help unmask emotions integral to the telling of the story. I seem to have an affection for plays involving radios and the 1930s for some reason!

We have a talented cast and crew ready to bring this story of joy, sadness, loss and happiness to the NVT stage. A story with a rich emotional vein which will hopefully move you.

Gerry McCrudden

Wedding Thanks

Kristy and Colin would like to thank everyone who helped in any way to make their wedding day so wonderful at the NVT. We didn't let a little bit of snow and ice get the better of us!

We would also like to say a huge 'Thank you' to our guests who bought NVT bricks as wedding gifts. So far the total raised is nearly £600! Plus the bar was busy all night so there were a few pounds raised there too!

If anyone still has an NVT brick form and donation sitting at home, please do send it in so we can count the final amount raised and you can be added to the Great NVT Chart in the South Hall.

Kristy and Colin Elmer

The Stuffing Team vs. January snow

We really owe very special thanks to the stuffing team who managed to get together by foot, bus etc. to stuff the January newsletter AND get the stuffed envelopes to the post office.

The team on that cold, snow-covered Wednesday in early January were only Linda and Diane performing a task usually done by five or six NVT people.

Thanks so much, from all of us!

MANAGEMENT: Who we are and how to reach us

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Louise Preecy	Front of House Manager	
Jerry Lyne	Secretary	

Next newsletter dates

Final copy date:
Monday 1 March

Printing:
Thursday 11 March

Stuffing & posting:
Wednesday 17 March

“The Ugly One”

reviewed by **Barrie Jerram**

This short fantasy play – it ran for about an hour - concerned the current over-obsession with external beauty. It was followed by *Your Face, Your Fortune*, a “live happening” in the bar. As I was not able to stay for this it is hoped that others may be able to comment on it.

The central character, Lette, believes himself to be “normal” but is in fact unspeakably ugly, a truth that has escaped him all his life. Even his wife, who loves him dearly as a person, can only view him sideways-on by looking at his left eye only. When they first met and bedded his face was obscured by oil. Following the revelation of his ugliness he resorts to plastic surgery and his face is turned into a thing of beauty.

At first the transformation gives him fame and makes his fortune but things turn sour as more and more people have the same surgery. The effect of this produces clones that deprive him of his fame and identity. His subsequent despair drives him almost to the point of suicide.

The play concludes on a note of high narcissism that leads to a ménage à trois between Lette, the Mother and the Son.

As Lette, Andy Bell really inhabited the character, giving an extraordinary strong performance that developed the multi-faceted character changes. His cross talking act with himself at his darkest moment was a tour de force. This performance must rank as one of his best

The other seven parts were shared by the other three actors. Katie Grace Cooper slipped easily between her differing personas – the loving wife, the surgeon’s assisting nurse and president of a big company. Each part was perfectly

defined and her sense of comedy was delightful in the early scenes where she avoids looking directly at Lette.

Christian Clifford-Walsh was provided with a chance to prove his versatility by the variation he provided in playing two not dissimilar roles – as Lette’s ambitious colleague he was suitable snide and devious whilst his mother dominated gay was almost reptilian at times.

Completing the cast and making his debut was Chris Jenkins, a product it would appear of the NVT’s acting classes. His portrayals of Lette’s buffoon boss and the camp plastic surgeon were more cartoonist in characterisation contrasted with the “reality” of the others.

I understand that directing the play for Mike Stubbs was not without its problems and that Mark Wilson offered assistance. Any such problems were totally absent from the finished work. Skilful direction ensured that the performance flowed freely. Changes of locations and character occurred seamlessly as the actors moved from the audience to integrate with the on-stage action. An inventive touch was having the operation carried out by the doctor and the nurse in the posturing style of a conjuror and his lovely assistant – pure farce.

Not for the first time a minimalist set proved to be most effective. On this occasion the use of white drapes, a chair and lighting was all that was needed to enhance the acting.

This play replaced the planned production of “Heroes”. Knowing the quality of that play I hope that a place will be found for it in a future season.

Changing Faces

...is a British charity supporting and representing children, young people and adults who have disfigurements to the face, hands or body.



Since the theme of ‘The Ugly One’ is that of impact of facial attractiveness on people’s lives, we decided to join forces with Changing Faces and raise some money for them by supporting their “Lend your Face” campaign. At each performance of ‘The Ugly One’ audiences had the opportunity to have their photo taken to add to the face collage and donate £1 to the campaign. Many thanks to Simon Dylan for his photography – we raised £180, and donated over 200 ‘faces’ to the lend-your-face campaign.

If you missed the chance to lend your face, you can still do so online at <http://www.changingfaces.org.uk/lendyourface>

Thanks,

**Mike Stubbs &
Ollie Donovan**

“The Great Debate”

Ollie Donovan says “Open the door”

After six years, living in Brighton, with a passionate interest in theatre art, I’ve finally become a part of the New Venture Theatre. Now I’m here, I struggle to understand how it took me so long to get involved. My most distinct memory is desperately trying to get tickets to see ‘An Inspector Calls’ – phone ringing off the hook, dysfunctional website, numerous trips to the ‘box office’, just to find it locked up in the shade like an impenetrable fortress.

How many times have you heard people say: “New Venture Theatre? I’ve heard of it but I’ve never been.”?

Step back, and take a good look at this incredible space that we are gifted as a freehold. Step back, and imagine the incredible wealth of opportunity that this space represents, not just to the current membership, but to Brighton as a whole.

I adore Brighton. I could not even imagine, at this time, making anywhere else my home. I also do not assume that opening up our theatre to a wider public would damage it, because I maintain a comprehensive trust in our city’s community.

Why can we, NVT, not invite them in appropriately, and allow them to enjoy what we do, and what we can offer them? Why do we not keep our doors wide open whenever possible, allow people to come inside, allow people to look around, allow people to hear about what we are and what we represent? I would be willing to give two or three shifts a month to this – would you?

Increased footfall is beneficial to any organisation, and if we are to develop our theatre and improve our facilities, we need more support. And, as a volunteer-run establishment, more support will organically lead to more opportunities. And, in the long run, sufficient funds and manpower to stop running the building at a ‘nuts and bolts’ level and start to seriously consider the seem-

ingly terrifying notion of ‘the future’.

NVT, as it stands, struggles because it lacks support. The membership, as it stands, is incredibly passionate, unbelievably capable, and outstandingly supportive. But the theatre is huge, and it needs more. To me, it seems to be a big dusty juggernaut that sits in the desert and attempts not to speak to anyone.

Imagine if our bar was open for food and drink six days a week, upstairs and downstairs were fully functional, garden terrace open, festivals running over Bank Holidays... It’s not unachievable. We just have to let people in, let them help us, and let them know we’re here. This is not neo-Romanticism in action, I’m realistic enough to know that this can’t happen overnight; this is a long term vision. I’m here for the long haul, and I know the majority of you intend to be. So, why not?

(Aside) If this appeals to you, we need an elected Chairman to take us there.

In July, as a small start, I am inviting about fifty local college students to showcase their talents at NVT over four days. These students, as local people, will by default become the actors, directors and producers of NVT productions of the near future; I hope you will come, show your support, and encourage all of these people to become a part of what we do.

I know I haven’t been here very long, but my immediate impression is that, moving forward, maybe it’s time to stop just ‘making theatre’ and start to build ‘a theatre’ – make ourselves known – because at the moment, in the bigger picture, we’re not really here.

Ollie Donovan

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David de Pinna argues, “Why not?”

Dear Editor,

Re. the point about whether standards would go down, particularly, if Community Theatre was allowed to define N.V.T. Is it not possible to open the theatre to outside companies and control them at the same time? Is it not possible to give the administrative committee of the theatre the constitutional power to decide whether proposed productions of outside companies are of the quality to authorize their plays to go on? Would not this procedure give the best of both worlds to New Venture Theatre? This could inaugurate a balance. Does this power already exist in the management?

I can’t see why it is a contradiction to produce plays by already existing members and outside companies provided the standard of excellence is observed and maintained, and an ultimate control in the chairman, artistic director and management committee that chooses the programme of plays be preserved in favour of the members that write plays, and put them up for consideration for production.

This would not seem, then, to be a conflict. There would seem to be a middle road. Benefit for all in the theatre, promising expansion of vision. As long as the standard was/is kept up, how could we - the theatre - lose?

Yours faithfully,

David de Pinna

This newsletter is the third issue to contain opinions about whether we need a Chairman, and whether we want to transform NVT into a Community Theatre. There have been some passionate feelings in favour and against - but this should be the final debate in the newsletter unless something quite new and different comes along.

Charles Gilson, Editor

The future of NVT

by Mike Stubbs

Well, we've had a lively debate since the October AGM, but I wonder what the silent majority thinks

In the last 4 years I've seen some wonderful work in our studio theatre. NVT's creative, design and technical talents are outstanding. True, we don't always hit the heights but who does, in the risky world of theatre? And the level of activity is extraordinary for a place that is entirely volunteer run.

Like Eleanor, I have had considerable experience in amateur theatre and have seen many different models of how it can be organised. I was Chairman of a theatre like ours for seven years and we raised some £300,000 in refurbishment grants from local authorities and the Arts Council. We also generated much higher annual income from a more intensive use of the building, including the cafe and bar.

So it frustrates me to have raised "only" £14,000 for NVT, when I know we need at least £200,000 to put the building and its equipment in good order and a higher annual surplus to keep it that way.

We need a strategy and a structure which will give us a fighting chance to raise that kind of money. Without it we will continue to have the main theatre closed, an unreliable heating system, no air conditioning (vital in the studio), the kitchen condemned for food preparation, tired old furniture and equipment in the studio and bar, and a main staircase like something out of Bleak House.

Also, we could have a major structural problem at any time,

which would mean us trying to raise a substantial sum in a crisis situation. Perhaps those who oppose change would like to explain how they would deal with such a risk?

To attract grants and raise income we would need to open up the use of the theatre significantly, including more events like the 6th Form Showcases in July, and increase income from the bar, cafe and room hire. I'm certain we can do all this and protect our own schedule of productions.

We need an effective management structure to shape and carry out such a strategy, starting with the appointment of a Chairman to help us reach these goals.

There's nothing revolutionary about having a Chairman-it has been the norm for many years in all kinds and sizes of organisations. Just about everybody has one, from Brighton Little Theatre to Questors, from golf clubs to the Women's Institute.

NVT is the odd one out, and we suffer for it.

With the right Chairman we'd have someone to focus primarily on our longer term plans, win the support of members for these and drive the major projects. At the same time he or she would represent NVT to those who influence arts policy in Brighton. That is essential to any substantial fundraising campaign.

Done properly this is a big job in its own right, and combining the Chairman's role with that of Admin Director is an awkward compromise which just doesn't work. It's the organisation that's

wrong, not the individual.

I'm uncomfortable criticising a committee that I'm part of, especially as I very much respect the commitment of those people who keep NVT together on a day-to-day basis. However, I need to explain why the present system is not working so that people understand why I want to change it.

I've just sat through another committee meeting where many items listed for action were again carried forward with no progress having been made. Some of them haven't progressed for many months, including getting designs and cost estimates for the various options for the upstairs theatre. An effective full time Chairman would not let this happen. He or she would ensure that priorities are clear and that the necessary resources and skills are applied to the tasks.

The idea that the Chairman might act as some kind of dictator, riding roughshod over the wishes of members, is simply not true because he, or she, would be just one of a group of Trustees elected by the members. The Chairman would have only a casting vote on the committee and would be re-elected annually by the members.

So, that's where I stand. By the way, I do not intend to stand as Chairman myself, but there are several members who I think could do the job very well.

I look forward to an Extraordinary General Meeting being held, in accordance with the vote at the AGM last October, to change the Constitution so that a Chairman can be appointed. I hope the Committee will fix a date for this soon and that all members who care about the future of NVT will attend.

NEW VENTURE

The Making

This article was written by a founder member, Derek Mason, and the Admin Director, Tony Loveless, on the occasion of our 50th Anniversary Production.

Perhaps some of the feelings they expressed may be relevant to the current "Great Debate".

Way back in 1947 two enthusiastic young men – A. Graham Phillips and Freddie Adames – decided to form a theatre group, for the express purpose of presenting plays, old and new, in the towns of villages of Sussex. Finance for the project was provided by an equally enthusiastic collection of actors, and technicians; this was the birth of "New Venture Productions". Membership of the Company was restricted to 20, each member guaranteeing 5% of the loss on any production. If memory serves, there was only one occasion on which any Guarantor member was called upon for this purpose, and the expense was nominal.

The cost, and the immense difficulty of organising outside venues, keeping plays in rehearsal, and arranging publicity for non local events, meant that the fine vision of the barn storming troupe did not last long – it was not practical, though it was not completely forgotten and occasionally surfaced. The local home of the Company at it's inception was Fabian House, a venue which presented some problems of presentation but which gave the Company rewarding experience. As the Acting & Technical membership grew, the acting Company adopted the name "The Brighton & Hove Repertory Company", a style previously owned by a professional company which had ceased to exist, NVP was affiliated to the Community Centre which enabled it to hire rooms at the old Middle Street School – an infants' school, with infants' desks and chairs! But at last there was space in which to rehearse – rather than members' front rooms – and as audiences grew the Company branched out

and used Dorset Gardens, the Pavilion Theatre and Ralli Hall for its productions. Then it became feasible to rent the upper part of an old stables in Grantham Road as a workshop for set building and before long it became obvious that if it was made habitable for rehearsal, NVP would have a sort of home of its own.

About this time Freddie Adames found pressure of business and home affairs too great and had to break his connection, but Graham Phillips still had a burning ambition to house the Company in permanent premises with everything under one roof, and when the Treasurer – Les Osborne of the infectious chuckle – saw that Christchurch Hall in Bedford Place was "to let", he started enquiries that led to the sort of enthusiastic follow-up which is the stuff of fairy tales. The Company, in special meeting, unanimously backed the Committee's recommendation that it proceed to obtain a lease on the premises; this was done and work started.

Raising the money to convert the upper floor from school rooms to a full-size stage 33' by 17' with a proscenium arch of 21', a raked auditorium, two dressing rooms, a green room, office, workshop, and props room was a long and slow business, and the resultant shoe-string budget meant that all the work, with the exception of one RSJ which was essential to permit the removal of pillar, was done by members of the Company. The power-wiring, the auditorium floor, the seating (from an old cinema on the seafront), the partitioning, the stage curtain – handmade and for many years our pride and joy – all represented the enthusiasm and dedication of a

small band of people with a single aim: to provide comfortable and professional facilities for a loyal following which had been supportive through thick and thin for more than 10 years. And there was the added bonus of a sense of real achievement, of pride in a job well done, and the delight of working with a sense of permanence and history in the making.

So, on 14th November 1958, a momentous date in the Company's calendar, the first New Venture Production to hit the boards in its very own theatre – The Burning Glass – lit the way to the future.

New Venture enjoyed the confidence that its own premises bestowed from that moment on. The quality of performance, and the number of productions mounted each year, increased its reputation grew; this at a time when the number of theatre groups in the area continued to expand and the available talent was necessarily spread thin. Graham's policy was to expect loyalty from his Company and it paid off; it led, perhaps, to a reputation for insularity, but it was vital to retain our talent if New Venture Theatre was to remain a viable proposition, and it did. It has to be remembered that in those early days there were very few sources for outside money: English Heritage, The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, The Lottery were all unknown. Even big business was almost unable to help and resources had to be begged, borrowed or worked for, and coffee mornings and jumble sales were frequent happenings. Another source of income was the occasional "Weekender", a Christmas Anthology or revue or Music Hall

PRODUCTIONS

of a Theatre

originated for performance over perhaps 3 nights, and this was Graham's favourite way of raising revenue: "As an artistic company we should raise our money by artistic means". Sadly it was on just such an occasion, the production of a home-made revue he directed under the title *Merely Players*, that we learned of his sudden and totally unexpected death. The first night, Friday 21st June 1974, was very well received; on the Saturday afternoon the news reached us and a hurried consultation by the Committee led to the decision that the show should go on. How we got through it, I don't know, but what came next was unanimous and certain. It would be no tribute to the work of our Founder/Director, and no appreciation of our respect for him, if we let the Company fold, and there followed a long period of the most exceptional cooperation and good will from all sides.

The Company went from strength to strength, increasing its membership to a peak of 800+ some 15 years ago, which, on reflection was astounding since we could afford little in the way of advertising and almost all introductions were by word of mouth. At that time we were a private theatre club, as we are still for main theatre productions upstairs.

In 1981, with our lease expired and the Church Commissioners, who owned the building, wishing to knock it down, we again held a meeting of the membership, this time to discuss the suggestion that we should purchase the freehold if possible. This we determined to do and a long process of meetings with the owners and the Brighton Council ensued, resulting in our purchase of the freehold in March 1983. A phenomenal amount of work was required to prevent the structure crumbling completely, and the first major

step was taken in the summer of '84 when we put a new roof on the building. At the same time an on into'85 the foyer, the studio theatre and a Community Hall were created with the help of the Government's Youth Training Scheme and, on Sunday 19th October 1986, we opened "In-the-round" Studio Theatre space one ground floor with a production of the Sarah Daniels play *Masterpieces*. In 1992 we obtained a Theatre Licence for the Studio space and the first play, in *New Venture Theatre*, to be truly open to the public was our production of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, adapted by Steven Berkoff. The following year saw *New Venture* presenting the play again, this time in Prague but that's yet another story.

1995 saw us complete the second major part of the building refurbishment, the renewal of almost all of the facing brickwork and the replacement of most of the window frames and rainwater downpipes, all of which were in a poor state. This cost the Company over £60,000 and could not have been completed without the assistance of the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, English Heritage, Brighton Borough Council, Amex, the Arts Trust of Brighton and Hove and the many members who gave their time, energy and expertise to the project.

In 1990 we were invited to join the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain, something of an honour because such invitations are not lightly given, and something of an advantage, too, since there is a wealth of experience and knowledge in such a broad church, covering almost any circumstance in which a Company such as ours is likely to find itself. And this season – in 1997 – we complete our first 50 years.

So what have we done in that time? And what do we plan to do

in the next 50 years?

A mere list of productions would be boring in the extreme. Suffice it to say that we have run the gamut. We have presented plays ancient and modern, plays, English (parochial even) and foreign; straight plays, political plays, verse plays, weird plays, new plays, comedies of all description, tragedies, histories.... You name it, we've done it. Mind you we've not yet tackled the musical....

In total we have presented, as full-scale productions – but excluding dozens of "Weekenders", rehearsed readings, anthologies etc. – 385 plays including the current celebratory 50th season production of *The Winter's Tale*, and here's a coincidence (and it truly is a coincidence): the play chosen to mark our 50th production was also the *Winter's Tale*. It must be a play with a very special meaning for us.

As to the future – who knows? We have run a number of actor's workshops over the past year and we will arrange more of these in the coming year and supplement them with acting classes for interested members who wish to expand their skills. It is also in mind, and if a committed leader) can be found to start a *New Venture Youth Theatre*, and there are outlined plans to upgrade our facilities to provide a bar, modernised toilets and extra rehearsal space.

Most of all, our future is – as it always was – in the hands of you, our patrons. For as long as you support us we shall continue to bring you a varied programme of the best plays we can find, presented to the very best of our ability. That is our pleasure. Our aim is to ensure that it is yours too.

Derek Mason/Tony Loveless

Acting Class

1, 8th, 15, 22 February Body Awareness — Ulrike Schilling

During these classes we will be looking at physicality, focus on the use of individual body parts and posture and explore presence.

Ulrike has studied Dance and Visual Art and performed in a variety of work ranging from street theatre to TV. She devises her own work and had 2 pieces premiered at the NVT and a promenade performance of 'Icarus' following in the May Festival 2010.

1, 8, 15, 22, 29 March and 12, 19, 26 April — Rikki Tarascas

An eclectic and energetic workshop that will look at the presence of the performer exploring what it is that makes a person watchable.

The workshops will examine how stage presence and the dynamics of play between actors can contribute to a vibrant ensemble, and how rhythm can be used to surprise and to create dramatic and comic moments.

As part of the process we will work with improvisation and techniques used in screen writing to create dramatic narratives.

We will work towards the performance of a series of themed final dramatic scenes, which will be performed at the Social on 29th May.

Rikki Tarascas has taught both full- and part-time across arts disciplines and directed productions for a number of drama schools. He taught both stage and screen acting for Italia Conti Theatre Academy using the Stanislavskian method as a foundation, and Mountview Theatre Academy, where he taught screen acting and co-produced two summer schools, introducing outside professionals to shoot a number of short student films.

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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. We need more sponsors, so please email charles.gilson@btinternet.com if you have any ideas in that direction.



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Fundraising

It would be wonderful if members would remember NVT in their Wills . . . bequests large and small would be most welcome.

Do we have any members who would be prepared to make a sponsored Sky-dive this Spring/Summer on behalf of NVT? The first £200 would pay for the dive and the rest would be added to NVT funds. Anyone interested please email charles.gilson@btinternet.com

