

Garden Suburb Theatre excels



Walking into Little Oak Wood Open Air Theatre is like entering into a secret enchanted garden that nobody knows exists.

Garden Suburb Theatre's production of *Our Country's Good*, by Timberlake Wertenbaker is the true story of the first penal colony in Australia. The play introduces us to the hard times and conflicts of both the convicts and guards. A Lieutenant decides he wants to impress his superiors by directing a play, he uses the convicts as actors. Not everyone is impressed with this idea of course. We follow both sides, the convicts and the guards, and realise how easily life can change direction without us being able to control it.

This theatre group is blessed with extremely talented actors. All twenty-two parts are shared by only ten actors, sometimes having to change roles right before our very eyes; they swap a jacket or a wig and seamlessly continue into the next character. This lightening speed change demonstrates just how good these actors are.

Anna Rolfe (Second Lieutenant William Faddy RM, Dabby Bryant,

Meg Long) has the audience captivated as soon as she speaks, her stage presence and character acting is outstanding, she has the right balance of humour and grit that her character portrays. Emily Hill (Lieutenant Will Dawes RM, Liz Morden) is so believable as her character Liz Morden and clearly understands how complex the character is meant to be: angry and violent yet so vulnerable. Superb acting.

The set is very simple but because the acting is of such a high standard, I felt I was in a different scene regardless of



The Merchant of Venice, Garden Suburb Theatre's other open air theatre play this summer

material methods, and the costumes are impressive.

Director, Kayne McCutcheon, and assistant director, Michael Reffold, created a really interesting play to watch. Open-air staging, whilst beautiful, brings obvious restrictions, but the whole production was put together so well and a complex script was made clear, understandable and extremely enjoyable.

SAMANTHA CARTWRIGHT

This review appeared in Sardines magazine, and is reproduced with the author's permission.

Tapestries of Difference

"Is it chance or the hand of God which makes the world go round?"

Volunteer staff at the HGS library are sometimes asked to review new books if they, or their authors, have some connection to the Suburb; so, when I received an email with news of a book that "starts and ends in North London, with a middle in Africa," I quickly responded that I'd be keen to read and review it. Mainly, what had attracted me was a coincidence: in common with the main characters in the book, I have spent many years in both places.

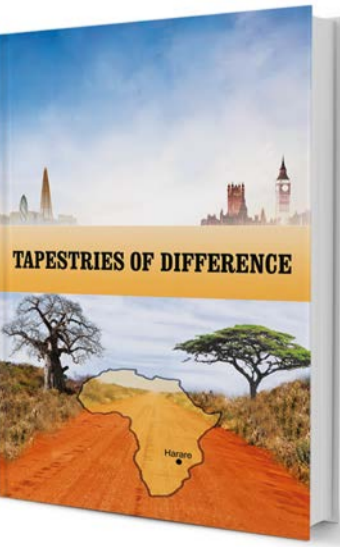
By another quirk of synchronicity, the book was delivered into my hands in the same week that the world learned of Robert Mugabe's death and, as Zimbabwe is the region in Africa in which some *Tapestries of Difference* by Roger Riddell is set, the added layers of coincidence became increasingly intriguing.

But more was to follow. From the synopsis on the back cover of the book a phrase jumped out at me: "succession of coincidences"! By now I was irreversibly hooked: even the plot itself, I thought, owes its existence to events in which chance and coincidence coalesce to drive the action forward.

And what a plot it is. Emma meets Simon; they're both busy young Londoners embarking on their lives and careers and neither was aware at the time of their meeting that they were

looking for a soul mate (Emma, in fact, thought she already had one). Yet, they soon discover that they both were born in Zimbabwe, and that they both came with their families to England as children in order to escape their native country's ruinous descent under Mugabe. Of course, the coincidence doesn't end there; it turns out that their families share not only similarities but also secrets. Neither Simon nor Emma is the first of their line to encounter the other – their histories have long been linked. This time, the fact, when it is revealed, is more than just another coincidence; it's far more serious.

Riddell takes us on a journey from London, to Harare and beyond, and then back again. Readers from our particular



corner of northwest London will, through these pages, find themselves in locations they instantly recognise. In yet another coincidence, while I was reading the book, a friend suggested we meet for a walk at a specific point in Hampstead Heath. It was only while ambling along that it struck me that I was in the precise spot I'd read about earlier that day. Similarly, in his evocation of the sights, sounds and smells of Africa, I felt as if Riddell had transported me back to a place in which every detail was familiar.

This is Riddell's first novel, though not his first book (he has published non-fiction and academic works). Clearly, his time in pre-independence Rhodesia, followed by his years later as Chair of the first Presidential Commission (tasked with recommending how to restore the Zimbabwean economy damaged by economic sanctions and war) not only created a huge reservoir of insight but also instilled within him a deep fondness for the country and its people.

In *Tapestries of Difference* Riddell presents a vast canvas on which questions around love, loyalty, morality, faith, race, politics, compassion, and forgiveness are set out to be considered. But the human condition is complicated and not all of his characters possess the maturity and understanding required to help us untangle the

The Lady in the Van

Garden Suburb Theatre will be performing *The Lady in the Van* by Alan Bennett at Upstairs in the Gatehouse in November.

The talented cast and crew are currently working hard on this wonderful piece of theatre. The play is a must see for all who enjoyed the film of the same name, which starred the venerable Dame Maggie Smith in the title role.

The Lady in the Van tells the true story of playwright Alan Bennett's friendship with Miss Mary Shepherd. Despite her being a crabby, eccentric and unsanitary homeless woman, Bennett "allows" her to park her van in the driveway of his

Camden home for three months... she stays there for 15 years! During her 15-year stay in his drive, Bennett balances his writing career with watching over Miss Shepherd and providing for his increasingly invalid mother. Though he denies "caring" for anyone, he slowly becomes aware of his growing friendship with Miss Shepherd.

The production comes to Upstairs at the Gatehouse (Highgate, London N6 4BD) from 21-24 November. Evening shows on Thursday to Saturday will start at 7.30pm and there will be a 4pm start on Sunday 24 November. Tickets are £14/£12 concession and can be booked at



www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com or by calling 8340 3488. For further information, please visit www.gardensuburbtheatre.org.uk

FIONA WHITE

Life at the Fringe

I've lived on the Suburb for 38 years, longer than my career, first as a practising barrister and then in the Ministry of Justice, doing things like advising the Lord Chancellor or working on judicial appointments. When I retired joyfully from all this, I decided to concentrate on acting and performing. I do now have an agent and I am a member of Equity. My special love is cabaret. I have performed at London venues like the Crazy Coqs, the Jermyn Street Theatre and the Pheasantry, doing a mixture of original and existing material. Looming over me was the prospect of the Edinburgh Fringe, which I hoped might raise my profile. For that I felt I had to produce entirely original material. In 2016 I finally made it there.

My show was called 'Angel to vampire!' It was based on my life's yearnings, illustrated by various quirky characters, including, no surprise, an angel and a vampire. What many people don't realise is the huge amount of effort you have to put into getting your show noticed. In 2016 there were 3,500 shows in the Fringe. That is a lot of competition. I had two huge and striking posters (which showed me – as an angel and a vampire!) One poster was impressively visible – in a side street which not many people used. The other was on the railings in a very busy square. Unfortunately, it was usually hidden behind a parked car. Apart from that, there are an awful lot of posters around Edinburgh during the Fringe. So you have to push your show by handing out flyers. I really didn't like doing this, as I had to get used to stopping

knots. The one notable exception is Sarah (in my view the most well drawn character in the book). She's a quiet, modest soul – a hospice nurse who lovingly ministers to her terminally ill patients and those around them. It is not coincidental that it falls to her, with the wisdom and empathy her vocation has infused into her, to take charge at a moment when only these qualities can solve an impending crisis. "We are a family deeply troubled by war," she says, before explaining in a haunting *cri de coeur* that it is the strength of hope for the future, and not the weakness of despair about the past, that provides the only viable solution. It is a lesson not only for the characters, or the people of Zimbabwe, but for all the world.

The reviewer is a volunteer librarian at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Community Library.



people. As it happens, I never once saw any of them at my show! I did get others to flyer for me and they were much better at it. In short, though the show was well reviewed, I lost money, but gained experience and valuable contacts.

After that I tried other Fringes and received a nomination for excellence in new writing. I then devised my present show called 'Too young to stay in, too old to go out!' about the challenges and opportunities of getting older. This seems to resonate with many people. It got in audiences at Brighton and I even made a profit at the Camden Fringe in 2018. Not having to pay for accommodation helped. The show had good or very good reviews, so I took it to the Edinburgh Fringe this year. This time I did not bother with huge posters. Instead I spent money on advertising. I was particularly pleased with the ad in the Oldie,

which has the right demographic. Frankly, I'm not sure these advertisements helped that much. I got better at flyer-ing. I offered deals and cheerfully approached people who looked like my audience. I worked out a good pitch. After a slow start, this time the numbers really improved. I recognised people I had spoken to. People came because others had recommended the show. My audience was bigger than in 2016. So was the Festival. This year there were about 4,000 shows!

The Edinburgh Fringe can be frustrating, disappointing, rewarding and energising all at once. I must have walked miles every day. It's a specially huge task for a solo performer. The Fringe can bring you down or you can choose to get on top of it. You have to be on your game the whole time. I found the whole experience life affirming. I'm going back next year.

NIGEL OSNER

Welcome to St Jude's

Sunday December 22:

6pm Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, followed by mince pies and mulled wine

Christmas Eve:

4pm Children's Nativity Play

11.30pm Midnight Mass

Christmas Day:

8am Mass of the Dawn

10.30am Christmas Celebration followed by seasonal refreshments

All Welcome

SAINT JUDE-ON-THE-HILL • THE PARISH CHURCH OF HAMPSTEAD GARDEN SUBURB

www.stjudeonthehill.com