

BIG DRAMA

London's new theatreland is being established in Southwark, with eight theatres to open in the next two years. Companies are moving to larger premises, a renowned theatre school is relocating from north London – and a 900-seat theatre will be built at One Tower Bridge. James Wood treads the boards



MEASURE FOR MEASURE SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

On the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, outgoing US president Barack Obama visited Shakespeare's Globe theatre in Southwark on his last official visit to the UK as commander-in-chief. He was treated to a personal performance of a scene from Hamlet, during a rare respite from the political unrest of 2016 in a show of respect to a figure with an infinite literary legacy.

Hordes of tourists have visited the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe since it opened in 1997, a few hundred feet from where it was first built in 1599. The venue is used for a variety of activities. Students and academics take part in workshops and attend lectures and hundreds of thousands of people watch plays every year in a setting that aims to replicate the experience of watching Shakespeare's plays in his own time.

The project to rebuild the Globe was instigated by American actor and director Sam Wanamaker, who commissioned extensive research and archaeological excavations to determine what the original theatre would have looked like. Wanamaker died before the project was complete, but the resulting thatched roof and timber frames of the finished building are said by historians to be as faithful a reconstruction imaginable.

Shakespeare is performed almost daily at the Globe. Last year, 10 plays were nominated for Olivier awards, 89% of productions were at full capacity and 356,000 tickets were sold. The opening of the indoor Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at the beginning of 2014, allowing plays to be shown all year round, has helped achieve these statistics.

Based in the Bankside Cultural Quarter, the venue continues to not only have a significant impact on tourism in the surrounding area and London as a whole but it is a source of great inspiration for those aspiring to work in the theatre.

Engagement with young people worldwide is the Globe's ambition and in 2015, it established centres for teaching Shakespeare in China and the USA.

As creative accolades also continue to be won at respected theatres nearby such as the National, the Young Vic and the Old Vic, new initiatives in the borough are developing at a fast pace. With established theatres moving to bigger premises, new venues being created and hundreds of students set to move to new educational facilities, Southwark is fast becoming London's new theatre heartland.

OPPOSITE:
Cabaret performer Meow Meow as Titania in A Midsummer Night's Dream at Shakespeare's Globe in 2016.

SANDS FILMS

It's not all about theatre – independent production company, Sands Films, also operates from an 18th century warehouse in Rotherhithe. It was founded by Richard Goodwin and director Christine Edzard in the early 1970s.

The site features studios, a screening theatre, a set construction workshop and is well-known in the industry as a costumier for period productions.

Notable productions for which Sands Films has provided costumes include *Death on the Nile*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

The local community benefits from Sands' own cinema club, which aims to screen the best of world cinema, all for the cost of a voluntary donation.

THEATRE

TWO GENTLEMEN OF ... LONDON THEATRE COMPANY

Having established The London Theatre Company in 2015, those behind it – the former National Theatre directors, Nicholas Hytner and Nick Starr – marked the occasion with plans to build a 900-seat riverside theatre as part of Southwark's One Tower Bridge development.

It will be the flagship venue for Hytner and Starr's independent production company and will be the first of its scale to be built in London for 40 years.

Berkeley Group and Southwark Council had been looking for a cultural organisation to occupy an empty space in the development – the scheme will also feature restaurants, cafes and shops. Originally the idea was to let it to the Royal Opera House during the renovation of its Covent Garden home, but this was abandoned in favour of the permanent theatre in August 2015.

Hytner and Starr were at the helm at The National Theatre for 12 years, achieving considerable commercial success. They oversaw the venue's income rise from £22.9 million in 2003 to £69.6 million 10 years later, boosted by productions such as *The History Boys*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night-time*, and *One Man, Two Guvnors*, which were later performed at the West End and then Broadway.

According to Hytner and Starr, "the time was right" to build a new theatre in an already popular cultural location, which will become the only commercial theatre outside the West End. They point out that despite numerous Victorian and Edwardian theatres, relatively few new facilities of this scale have been built in London in the last hundred years.

Steve Tompkins and Roger Watt of Haworth Tompkins, the pair behind the Everyman and Royal Court theatres in Liverpool, have designed the auditorium for the theatre, which is expected to open in 2017, subject to planning permission.

Harry Lewis, managing director at Berkeley Homes (SEL), says the theatre "will deliver on the world-class cultural facility envisioned by Southwark Council for One Tower Bridge".

"It will have a strong beneficial impact on Southwark, creating a new cultural riverside quarter and bringing increased footfall, growth and jobs," he continues.

"An institution of this calibre will strengthen the area as a theatre district, consolidating Southwark's status as a major cultural destination. Together with new restaurants, cafes and shops, we can create the Covent Garden of the South Bank."



THEY CALL FOR DATES AND QUINCES ... THEATRE DELICATESSEN

Established in 2009, Theatre Delicatessen works with commercial property owners to make use of empty buildings up and down the country, creating pop-up performance spaces, rehearsal rooms, offices, studios and workshops, which open opportunities for involvement in the arts to an increasingly wide variety of people.

The search for a more permanent base led to the discovery of a derelict library site (above) in Burgess Park in summer 2016, which according to Roland Smith, the theatre's co-artistic director, "was in-line with the calibre of development we were looking for". Theatre Delicatessen has since taken a two-year lease on The Passmore Edwards Library Building at the park.

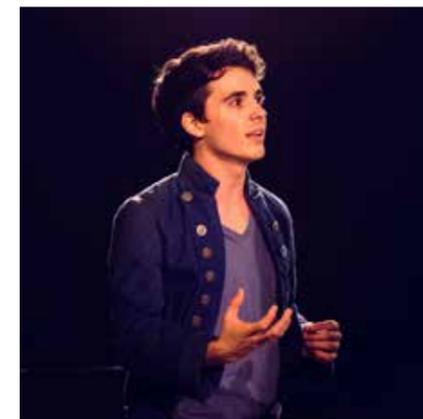
"It was perfect for what we needed," says Smith. "We saw a great opportunity to use the library and its surroundings to turn the site into an immersive theatre (below) and arts hub where anyone can participate. We're

doing this in ways such as improv comedy sessions and creating an arts cafe at the site where open-mic nights will take place. We want this to be as much a space for the local community as it is for practising artists."

These ambitions are being fulfilled since the August move to the site. Unusual classes such as circus skills training have been established and The Theatre Delicatessen also offers artist residencies.

One of the first art groups to take space was Collectif And Then, winners of the 2016 Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust Award, who staged an interactive show called *The Machine* as part of The Barbican's Open Season in London this autumn.

Arts Council England has now pledged £15,000 to the group for its 'Performers in the Park' programme. Meeting on Sunday afternoons, three age groups will work alongside each other to develop their performance skills in different areas.



FAR LEFT: Students on musical theatre BA courses at Mountview Academy in a recent production of *Jayne Eyre*.

LEFT: Mountview Academy turns its hand to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

BELOW: Open spaces will encourage collaboration between students at Mountview Academy.



YOUTH IS FULL OF PLEASURE MOUNTVIEW ACADEMY OF THEATRE ARTS

The principal and artistic director of Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, Stephen Jameson, is "over the moon". It is late September 2016 and the drama school has received planning permission to move to its new multimillion-pound base next to Peckham Library – an area that he describes as "the most culturally exciting in London".

Those enrolled on courses and in their first year of study in Wood Green, north London – where Mountview has been for 30 years – will be among the first to use the new facility when the move takes place in September 2018.

Its new base will feature a 200-seat performance space and an 80-seat studio, alongside 22 teaching studios, music practice

rooms, two TV studios and a radio suite. Building work is due to start in 2017 with only "stage four" planning permission – approval for the finer details – left to be confirmed.

For Jameson, having the ability to teach all lessons from one facility will be a game changer. Around 400 students are enrolled on diploma courses as well as BAs in television, theatre and film acting. As well as benefiting from the academy teaching staff's close monitoring, students will be able to build links with agents and casting directors and engage with an array of theatre and film professionals – such as set designers, lighting and sound technicians, choreographers, musical directors, actors and stage managers.

Jameson says: "It will be a fantastic environment for students, allowing them to work alongside professionals. I think that makes us really unique and among the finest conservatoires of our kind in the country."

Classes will also be open to residents in Peckham and the surrounding area once the move is complete. Mountview will involve students from schools in the area with workshops and classes and facilitate opportunities for local people, something Jameson says is central to the ethos that Mountview will bring to Peckham.

Above all, says Jameson: "We need a new home. This is the right time and Peckham is the right place."

THEATRE



REHEARSE YOUR PARTS
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE

A permanent base for Southwark Playhouse – one of the borough’s most established and respected theatres – has been sought since it was formed in 1993.

Current artistic director, Chris Smyrniotis, explains: “We have spent much of the last 23 years trying to find a secure home. Owing to rising rents, it has been hard to stay in one place for any length of time. We are currently housed in our third ‘temporary’ venue on Newington Causeway.”

In 2016, the company was offered the opportunity to take on two venues – one at the Elephant and Castle on a 125-year lease and the other under the arches of London Bridge on a shorter-term lease.

“Despite having been nomadic over the years we have still managed to grow significantly as an organisation,” Smyrniotis

says. “The opportunity to expand to two venues is a natural progression.”

The sleek concrete and steel of the Elephant and Castle development will offer a purpose built 300-seat theatre for the large-scale productions for which the Playhouse has made its name.

“Those subterranean arches will offer the same inspirational performance spaces as our previous venue, but this time without the mould and leaks,” enthuses Smyrniotis.

The upcoming move means the Southwark Playhouse can plan for the future, continuing to develop its artistic programmes. As with many theatres in Southwark, community engagement is a key part of its offer and it has been offering curriculum support to schools in the area throughout its existence. In 2016, its annual Shakespeare for Schools programme

will offer 1,500 tickets for local schools to see *The Tempest* free of charge.

Three companies operate at the Playhouse – Young Company, People’s Company and Elder’s Company. Performances currently running include the musical *Side Show* – a true story about conjoined twins – and the world premiere of *Orca* by Matt Grinter, who was the winner of the Papatango new writing prize. Upcoming projects include *Licensed to Ill*, a musical biopic about The Beastie Boys.

The wait to find permanent premises may have been long but Smyrniotis is proud to be part of the borough’s cultural scene: “Southwark has a very varied, vibrant and vocal community who care about what goes on and why,” he says. “It’s a privilege to be part of that and I really hope it is not lost as the area is redeveloped.”

TALK OF DREAMS
UNION THEATRE

After 18 years in a space that was formerly a paper warehouse in one of the arches next to Southwark station, Union Theatre has settled into two refurbished arches, directly opposite its first home.

Prior to this, when Network Rail announced plans to redevelop the arches, more than 10,000 people signed a petition in a bid to save the theatre from the threat of closure.

Sasha Regan, the theatre’s director, is happy that the Union is staying at the site and pleased with the new premises: “We have been here for about three months now and it is starting to feel like home.

“I love the industrial feel of the new site – it’s all brick, glass, wood and metal – and yet it still feels very welcoming. Our old customers were worried that we would lose the character of the theatre during the relocation but I don’t think that we have.”

At the new home for the theatre, there is

also a restaurant, rehearsal room, and some offices to let. Enhanced facilities include tiered seats and an increased seating capacity. A youth theatre has also been set up, something Regan says she is “hugely proud of”. Many local children take part and evening classes are popular too.

Over the years, the Union Theatre has gained a reputation for staging musicals. Current shows include *Moby Dick* and a comedy called *Rumpy Pumpy*. In November and December, *Soho Cinders* will take centre stage – a modern musical adaptation of the Cinderella story.

Regan is proud to be in Southwark: “I have always loved this area,” she says. “You can walk through the area and stumble on so many fantastic little treasures. The more theatres in Southwark; the stronger the attraction for visitors. Independent business is thriving here – let’s just hope we can all afford to remain.”



ABOVE: Musical productions at the theatre have included *Moby Dick* (top) and *Out There* (below).

LEFT: Relaxing with a coffee outside the theatre’s newly refurbished arches.

BELOW: *Moby Dick* ran from September to November.



