

Putting on a show



Barking and Dagenham is working hard to engage the community with the arts, and thanks to the likes of Studio 3 Arts, is finding unique ways to inspire people. **James Wood** reports

Above: The final scene of *The Merchant of Venice* was performed in the council chambers.



IT HAS BEEN nearly 30 years since performing arts graduates of Barking College established Studio 3 Arts as a response to what they saw as a lack of cultural opportunities in the borough.

Progress has sped up in recent times, with the Broadway Theatre becoming a popular haunt in Barking town centre and a spate of summer festivals attracting large numbers of people during the last two summers (see pages 26 - 30).

A seven-year long Studio 3 Arts ambition to put on a Shakespeare play was realised in 2016, coinciding with the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death.

The challenges of engaging people with the great man's plays are a common sticking point for teachers, directors and script adapters. Selecting a play that would appeal to Barking and Dagenham's diverse demographic, where it is claimed that

more than 130 languages spoken in its schools, required careful planning.

The Merchant of Venice was the play chosen. Artistic director Liza Vallance felt that its themes of wealth, inequality, immigration and religious persecution could show the residents of Barking and Dagenham how Shakespeare's work might relate to their own lives as much as those of people in the 16th century.

The first job for writer and script adapter Ashley Joseph, who has worked for Studio 3 Arts for about 10 years, was to significantly cut down the original play in length to make it more digestible.

"The language is so far removed from today, so the challenges of being both faithful to the original script and making it accessible for people were tricky," he says.

"A lot of people don't think Shakespeare is important to them, so

Barking and Dagenham is on the brink of becoming a cultural hub. It has changed immensely

ACTing UP

Studio 3 Art's Ashley Joseph teamed up with comedy partner Tee Jay to offer Barking's young people the opportunity to try their hand at comedy improvised performance in August.

Running for the second year at the Rich Mix cinema in Bethnal Green, London, the project is part of the organisation's award-winning Big Deal programme.

Theatre, dance, music production, filmmaking and set design are among the activities Studio 3 Arts are encouraging young people to get involved in through the programme.



Pictured: Shakespeare brought to Barking – *The Merchant of Venice* was performed at various locations.





The fact that critics regarded my work well really means a lot. You feel like your hard work has paid off

Pictured: *The Times* newspaper gave a four-star review of *The Merchant of Venice* in July.

Little Radio

Studio 3 Arts was involved in a project that saw pupils of the Gascoigne Primary School in Barking and residents of the nearby Gascoigne estate take part in a musical performance at the Broadway Theatre in June.

The scheme commissioned by the Barbican Centre saw its two resident musicians, saxophonist Iain Bellamy and accordionist Stian Carstensen, join members of the Barking community to perform original songs inspired by their memories of the local area.

Around 150 year 5 students took part; performing songs they had written which reflected on their experiences of living in Barking.

Bellamy and Carstensen mostly worked in rural areas, but part of the agreement of the project was that they should work in one urban area – Barking.

The Little Radio was produced by Sound UK in partnership with Barbican Centre, Guildhall School of Music and Drama and Barking & Dagenham Music Service. It was supported by Arts Council England and PRS for Music Foundation.



putting this play on required a bit of a leap of faith.

“Approaching something like adapting Shakespeare was really scary as it was something I had never done before. I wanted to be faithful to the play, but at the same time, with my passion for rhythm, I had a great time playing with the iambic pentameter in the language.”

In what has been dubbed by colleagues at Studio 3 Arts as ‘Ashpean’ language, Joseph’s adapted script made references to modern day living such as social media, selfies and reality TV: “I considered the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* and how I could relate them to modern day settings and scenarios,” he says.

His work has received widespread praise, including in a four-star review in *The Times*, next to one about a Royal Ballet performance. “That was really overwhelming to see,” says Joseph. “The fact that critics regarded my work well really means a lot. You feel as though all of your hard work has paid off.”

But it wasn’t just a well-adapted script that led to sold-out performances night after night when the play ran in July.

The proposal submitted to local arts engagement group, Creative Barking and Dagenham, which pledged £40,000 towards the project, explained how the play would be a promenade performance moving between different landmarks across Barking town centre, including shops, restaurants, the Broadway Theatre and the council’s chambers for the final dramatic courtroom scene.

Hundreds of local people poured onto the streets of Barking to witness the dramatic spectacle and many were actively involved in the performance themselves.

With nine professional actors chosen for the main parts in the play, the rest of the cast and crew were made up of people from surrounding borough locations such as the Gascoigne estate.

In persuading people to get involved, Studio 3 Arts spoke not only to organisations normally on its radar, such as local theatre and arts groups and Barking and Dagenham College, but it also went into GP surgeries, cafes, libraries, parent groups, lunch clubs, older people’s social clubs and in other community spaces to forge relationships with local people.

“People aged between seven and 87 got involved and the reaction was amazing,” says Joseph. “Everyone really did love it. In recruiting, Liza and I spoke to a lot of people who didn’t really know about the opportunities in the area and hopefully this play has helped them feel a bit more proud about where they live.”

One local woman used the play



Open Estate

The Gascoigne estate has been renamed Weavers Quarter. It is currently subject to a regeneration project that will see 1,575 homes, a community centre and a public square being delivered by East Thames Group and Barking and Dagenham Council.

Studio 3 Arts received Heritage Lottery Funding for its Open Estate programme in 2016, which looks back at the estate’s history. The group will present the stories of the people who know the estate best, engaging with local community

groups; people who either live or have lived on the estate.

The aim is to showcase memorable stories at a ‘living museum’ which will tell former and current residents’ stories, as well as people who have worked or socialised there during Open House weekend in September.

The project includes the creation of residents’ commemorative ceramic pieces, as well as sound installations and an exhibition entitled ‘Understanding the Gascoigne in 50 objects’.

to surprise those who attended her wedding. Taking 86 guests to the performance right after getting married, friends and family were shocked when the bride turned up in the final scene at the council chambers, playing the duke.

It is this community engagement that Joseph believes is helping change the view that Barking and Dagenham is a place where people are not interested in the arts.

“It was definitely worth the challenge,” he says. “I really believe that Barking and Dagenham is on the brink of becoming a cultural hub. It has changed immensely in the years since I’ve been working here and with projects such as *The Merchant of Venice*, people are becoming more and more interested in the theatre.

“Knowing you have created something really amazing for the community is such a great thing.”