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Norfolk

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Totally amazing

Whatever your age, whatever your ambition, whatever your ability, Total Ensemble creates inclusive theatre with extraordinary results both on stage and off it

WORDS: Rachel Buller ♦ PHOTOS: Mark Ivan Benfield

When jobbing actress Rebecca Chapman went to watch a performance at the world famous Chickenshed theatre in London, it was she says, a life changing moment.

So inspired was she by what she had seen, it resulted in a change of direction – swapping endless auditioning for creating her own inclusive theatre company here in Norfolk.

She formed Total Ensemble in 2011 and this month will put on its most ambitious show yet – *Boy in the Lighthouse* – a totally original piece devised by cast members which will run for six nights during the Hostry Festival at Norwich Cathedral.

Rebecca's passion for inclusive theatre is infectious and she credits that enthusiasm and belief to Jo Collins, co-founder of Chickenshed, who is a patron of Total Ensemble. ▶

“I had been at Bristol Old Vic theatre school and wanted to be an actress. I was in London, working all sorts of jobs while auditioning and doing different roles. Then I went to Chickenshed to watch a production for the first time and I was so profoundly affected by what I had experienced. I sent them a long letter afterwards explaining why I thought it was so incredible. Watching that show literally changed my life. It turned it completely upside-down.”

Rather unexpectedly, says Rebecca, they wrote back, firstly asking her permission to use some of her words to send out to potential donors and secondly to offer her a job.

“They said my letter showed I really understood what they were all about. I ended up working for Chickenshed for three years and it was an extraordinary time. I quickly realised I was actually far more suited to being a facilitator rather than being in the limelight as an actor.”

When she moved to Norfolk, it was Jo at Chickenshed who urged her to establish an inclusive theatre company in the county. It was a big ask, but such was Rebecca’s unfaltering belief in the project, she was determined to make it happen.

“I just happen to think that the best theatre is inclusive theatre. It is not about patronising anybody or using labels, just what we can achieve as an ensemble using the many different skills and experiences which everyone brings.”

Coincidentally, around the same time she returned to Norfolk, Stash Kirkbride and



ABOVE:
Total Ensemble at rehearsal

BELOW:
The ensemble has a wide range of ages taking part

OPPOSITE:
The Total Ensemble Theatre Company cast for *Boy In The Lighthouse*



“Watching that show literally changed my life. It turned it completely upside-down”

Peter Barrow were in the process of setting up the Hostry Festival and were keen to put Rebecca’s fledgling theatre company under their umbrella, a relationship which continues.

“The first year, all we did was a workshop. Gradually it simply grew from there and now Total Ensemble’s performances are an integral part of the Hostry programme.”

Rebecca, who is founder and artistic director of Total Ensemble, says some people have a very set idea about what they do, but that is often far removed from the reality.

“People think disabled, then they think children, but we are totally inclusive. We have performers of all ages; we have a four-year-old on stage alongside a 70-year-old; some members have disabilities, some don’t; some are professionals keen to get back on stage, some are complete beginners wanting experience of theatre, someone might be a wheelchair user, someone else might have limited speech. Everyone has their own reasons to be there and everyone brings

something unique to our group.”

One cast member joined Total Ensemble because he was the only one of his family who didn’t act and he wanted to give it a go without feeling any judgement. It so happened, says Rebecca, his ‘acting family’ were actual Bollywood stars.

“His mum came over to London for a film premiere and then came to watch her son act with us. She couldn’t believe how incredible the performance was and was overwhelmed by what we did – and we all got to go and see her film at Cinema City for a special screening. Maybe we will take Total Ensemble to India!”

The company doesn’t have its own premises and uses a variety of rehearsal spaces around the city while working on a show. It also doesn’t operate weekly sessions or classes, it runs instead on a production by production basis – which can often take several months.

“We always work towards a production, whether that is a commission for an event, which we always see as real validation for our professionalism, or for

HOSTRY HISTORY

From its humble beginnings in 2010 with the performance of one play - Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana* - the Hostry Festival at Norwich Cathedral has become a two week celebration of the diversity of the arts with a packed programme of music, drama, talks and innovative, groundbreaking performance.

As well as the festival's central show - Total Ensemble's *Boy in the Lighthouse* - highlights include an 'In Conversation' event with writer, actress, comedian and leading disability rights ambassador Sally Phillips; talks featuring two high profile journalists, the BBC's Gavin Hewitt and Channel 4's Matt Frei; classical violin and guitar music from James Boyd and Harriet McKenzie; the Ella McCready jazz trio; dance from Danceitation; and drama and opera combine with Cocteau and Poulenc double bill *The Human Voice*. Paint Out Norwich brings artists from across the region to the streets of the city for a live art event, followed by an exhibition of the work they produce in the Hostry building.

The Hostry Festival, October 13 – 28, for a full programme see hostryfestival.org

a major show, such as for the Hostry Festival or the Norfolk and Norwich Festival.

Boy in the Lighthouse, which has a cast of 25, was developed from an idea by 20-year-old Hugh Darah.

The show, described beautifully as a dark story bathed in light, tells the tale of a young boy living in an isolated and forgotten lighthouse who embarks upon an adventure into fantastic worlds.

"The spark of the idea came from one of our most brilliant members, Hugh, who has been with us since he was 15. I was chatting to him one night and he said he kept having this dream about a boy in a lighthouse, and his description made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"We talked more and more about it and it grew from there. As with all our shows, everyone is involved in the whole process and provides creative material. If we have a poet, we will include poetry, if we have someone who dances, we will feature that.

Everyone shapes our shows."

Next year, Rebecca says the theatre company has plans to recruit a musical director, with Jo not only helping with the recruitment process but supporting and mentoring them as they embark on the role.

She says that running a community theatre company is not without its challenges, but the benefits to all of those involved, directly and indirectly, are extraordinary.

"We would love to expand but rather than stretch ourselves too thin, I would rather sustain what we are doing and be the best we can be, producing extraordinarily high quality theatre.

"Theatre has the power to change how people think, to change lives and to sometimes even save lives.

"We didn't set out to do that, just to make the best theatre possible, but I am incredibly glad that it can bring all those things as well." ♦

totalensemble.org

