



ABINGDON

From: Mr J Taylor – Director of Drama

11 November 2011

Dear parents

This term sees a feast of drama. There is the welcome return of the **Abingdon Drama Festival**, an event that last saw the light of day at Abingdon ten years ago, and a major production at St Helen's of one of the classics of the twentieth century music theatre repertoire.

Over three evenings (**November 30, December 1 & 2**), and running from **the earlier than usual time of 6.30pm until about 9.45pm**, the **Abingdon Drama Festival** comprises no fewer than **five plays each night** in a variety of spaces in the Arts Centre. With casts drawn from 5th, L6th and U6th years at Abingdon and St Helen's, each play is a relatively small-scale affair, lasting from 30 to 75 minutes. **In any one evening, you could see three of the plays, but not all five.** Of course, we very much hope you will want to see all five shows, but equally, you could see just one show in an evening if you wished. Please note that the audience capacity for each show will also be smaller than usual; for all but one of the plays, it is restricted to **sixty seats per show per night**. So, whether you want to come to one show or all five, **book seats now!** For details of how to order tickets, see the form accompanying this letter.

The five plays range from Shakespeare to the most contemporary of British and American playwrights. Whilst there is no common theme, all the plays invite a theatrical question that has exercised critics throughout history: are plays primarily for the eye or the ear? In Shakespeare's day, audiences spoke of going "to hear a play", perhaps reflecting a sense that in an era of limited stage scenery, it was the words that carried the greatest impact. Nowadays, we talk of going "to see a play", and if you've ever been to one of the West End's long-running musicals, it's probably the grand spectacle that most appeals. But whether it's the poetry of Shakespeare's iambic pentameters, the trans-Atlantic twang of crisp American voices, the glorious non-sequiturs of overheard conversations or the "vocal dandruff" of recorded speech listened to by actors through headphones and reproduced verbatim, the five plays of the 2011 Abingdon Drama Festival all hold a unique auditory mirror up to nature that will re-shape your world view. Here, in alphabetical order, are the five plays on offer:

***Come Out Eli* by Alecky Blythe**

Over Christmas in 2002, the London Borough of Hackney saw the longest siege in British history. The stand off involving gunman Eli Hall and his hostage lasted for sixteen days, and brought together the rich mix of cultures in Hackney's vibrant community. Using interviews collected from people watching at the cordon and in the aftermath, the play explores the impact of the siege to show how individuals struggled to make sense of an extraordinary event. By turns funny and poignant, the cast of twelve play forty-seven characters between in Alecky Blythe's first "recorded delivery" production. The actors wear headphones in performance and reproduce exactly the recorded voices of the real people to capture the immediacy of the actual event. **Please note: this production contains some strong language that may make it unsuitable for some age groups.**

***Cruising* by Alecky Blythe**

Maureen is a widow in her early seventies who's on the lookout for a new partner. So far, she's dated more than thirty men without success, so when her friend Margaret (aged seventy-six) prepares to trip up the aisle with eighty year-old Geoff, there's

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quite a lot at stake. Originally performed by actors in their thirties, the play has moments of high comedy yet also reminds us of the need for companionship throughout life. Again, actors work from recorded interviews and wear earphones during the performance, replicating every stutter, hesitation and vocal tic. **Candid material may make it unsuitable for some age groups.**

***Cymbeline* by Shakespeare**

This adaptation of *Cymbeline* offers the audience a quick canter through one of Shakespeare's most surprising and complex plays. Cut to the bone, but retaining the extraordinary mix of tragedy, comedy, horror and unrivalled poetry, this is a production that takes its influences from the pervading technology of the moment: projections, iPhones and laptops all have their part to play in telling this intricate story of love, betrayal and redemption. A hot-headed king banishes his daughter's husband; in a moment of madness that husband makes an unwise bet; plots and counter-plots abound, weaving tales of wicked step-mothers, loyal servants, kidnapped children and sleeping potions into a rich tapestry of theatrical magic.

***One Million Tiny Plays About Britain* by Craig Taylor**

In these snippets of overheard conversations from across the length and breadth of the country, Craig Taylor captures the state we're in with humour, pathos and perfect timing. Laugh-out-loud funny, and sometimes heartbreakingly moving, these tiny plays in which every one of us could have a starring role, are little windows into other people's lives that reveal the triumphs, disasters, prejudices, horrors and joys of twenty-first-century life.

***The Shape of Things* by Neil Labute**

"How far would you go for love? For art? What would you be willing to change? And what price might you pay?" These are the painful questions explored by contemporary American playwright Neil Labute in his 2003 play *The Shape of Things*, in which a young student drifts into an ever-changing liaison with an art student while his best friend's engagement crumbles, unleashing a potent drama that peels back the layers of two modern-day relationships and exposes the raw meat and gristle underneath.

The play contains some strong language.

The week after the Drama Festival, our friends and colleagues at St Helen's stage a joint senior production of ***Cabaret***, one of the twentieth century's defining music theatre shows. Based on Christopher Isherwood's memoir of life in 1930s Berlin, the show follows the fortunes of American writer Cliff Bradshaw and English cabaret singer Sally Bowles as they meet against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism. The performances take place on **Wednesday 7, Thursday 8 and Friday 9 December 2011 at 7.00pm in the Yolande Paterson Hall at St Helen's School**. Demand for tickets is sure to be high, so please contact the St Helen's school office on 01235 520173 at the earliest opportunity: adult tickets cost £9, concessions are £7.

I very much hope there will be something here to tempt you, and in anticipation that there is, I look forward to seeing you at one or more of the shows in a few weeks' time!

Yours sincerely

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