



# *What the Dickens?*

## *Halton Actors in residence*

**Claire Bigley**

The Brindley, a state of the art centre for theatre, cinema and visual arts in Runcorn, a town within Halton Borough Council in North West England, is now the home base of a two-handed professional women's theatre company known as HAIR. In 2006 two of the drama facilitators who worked within the Centre and were also professional actors decided to collaborate in forming a company based in The Brindley Studio theatre where both women had previously performed with the shows; "What the Dickens" and "Margaret Rutherford Re-called".

As Halton's Drama and Literature Officer, I was pleased to support the pair in gaining Arts

Council funding for a first big project in the following Spring. However in the meantime, Louise Nulty and Jacqueline Pilton were commissioned by The Brindley to present some site-specific drama as part of "Talkwrite", The Brindley's literary festival week in May 2006. Both Louise and Jacqueline, who have between them over 40 years experience of treading the boards, have also run other theatre companies and were used to producing, directing, writing and adapting as well as acting.

### ***Cross-gender acting***

So, with commission contract in hand they scripted some extracts from well-known novels

to be performed around The Brindley entitled "Novel Lives". In the cafe; Graham Greene's "Brighton Rock" came alive to the festival goers who were taking lunch. By the box-office Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson were in close discussion. (Oh, yes, these actresses are exceedingly versatile and cross gender acting holds no fears!) In the Art Gallery "Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit" was a dark and energetic performance; then for children of all ages Roald Dahl's "The Witches" was played out at the top of the stairs and finally an abstract piece of performance art relating to Angela Carter's short stories was presented by using the space around the glass walls of the cafe area and the

balcony beyond. Linking these performances together the two snobbish characters of June and Jane the ex-National Theatre dressers guided the audience around and about to the places where 'Novel Lives' could be seen. Of course Louise and Jacqueline played all the various parts and with consummate skill!

Later that year the work of applying for Arts Council funding and finding a play and a director was the main focus for Jacqueline and Louise who were now considering their main debut performance. By this time the pair were working under the title; "Halton Actors in Residence" (HAIR). Eventually, a challenging work by Sarah Kane, entitled "4.48 Psychosis" was found and HAIR seized upon this piece of 'in yer face theatre' written in 1999 shortly before the suicide of its author. The play looks at the subject of suicidal depression from a perspective of within the troubled consciousness of a woman suffering from this complaint. The play is unusual in that it is written like a poem with no specially designated characters and can be presented in a variety of ways with one, two or more actors. For a theatre piece dealing with such delicate matters in a complex and unusual way the right director had to be found. Eventually HAIR and The Brindley signed up Mark Chatterton - director at the Everyman, Liverpool, Oldham Coliseum and other theatres. The Brindley management, and I agreed to support HAIR in a number of ways: giving rehearsal and performance space, support with marketing and technical support. An application to the Arts Council came from HAIR in conjunction with The Brindley and early in 2007 funding was agreed. Mark Chatterton helped the two female actors to bring to fruition a delicately crafted, emotionally moving and thought provoking production which played to full houses on March 30th and 31st 2007.

### ***Washing her blood-stained hands***

Following this success HAIR was asked to perform the piece at The Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, for the Women's International festival there, in May this year. Louise and Jacky were delighted to accept the invitation as both had played the Brewery in other productions in previous times and loved the idea of promoting the work of The Brindley Arts Centre in another venue. Again "4.48 Psychosis" was greeted with much appreciation and many accolades and HAIR hope to return to Kendal in the future with another co- production.

Immediately after the tour to Kendal, HAIR were at work again with another Talkwrite - Literary Festival commission. This time the two actors were to present a play containing a

filmed soap opera, scripted and produced by themselves and with the aid of Mr William Shakespeare! The idea of the play, is that if Shakespeare were writing today no doubt he would be commissioned by BBC or ITV or an Independent television company. The play reveals what happens when Shakespeare (Louise Nulty) goes to meet the commissioning editor of Swan Television - Liz Tudor (Jacqueline Pilton). He is asked to show the film of his pilot episode of his newly crafted soap opera aptly named "Shakespeare Street".

The film was the central element of the show and had been shot in the area local to the Brindley, with regular theatre and workshop goers from Halton Borough performing as extras. Scenes were filmed in modern dress and on location in Runcorn and Widnes and were taken from "Romeo and Juliet", "Midsummer Nights Dream", "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Macbeth" and each represented a slice of a story as in a television 'soap'. On 14th and 15th May 2007 the audience at the Brindley Studio Theatre watched amazed and intrigued as each of the four story lines unfolded back and forth as in "Coronation Street" or "Eastenders"; only this time the places on the screen were very familiar. So too were the actors; as Louise and Jacqueline played all the characters. Laughter at the antics of Runcornian 'rough mechanicals' ("Midsummer Night's Dream") was subdued only by the sight of Lady Macbeth washing her blood-stained hands in the bar of "The Ring O' Bells" pub in Widnes.

"Shakespeare Street" was so successful that Louise and Jacky are now planning a more ambitious take on the same theme in the near future. The two female actors are gearing up to another full scale production and are hoping to present "Comedy of Errors" in the same film/ live format with Louise and Jacqueline playing 18 parts between them! Mark Chatterton is on board as director again and all are happy to be supported by The Brindley once more, in this new venture, which they also hope to tour.

So look out in April 2008 both at The Brindley, Runcorn and other venues for a comedy tour-de-force the like of which has seldom been seen before. ●

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