

On the Pulse of London

Award-winning artistic director Neil McPherson tells Jordie Licht about working at The Finborough, Somersaults and the future of fringe

By [Jordan Licht](#), Deputy Arts Editor (2012/13)

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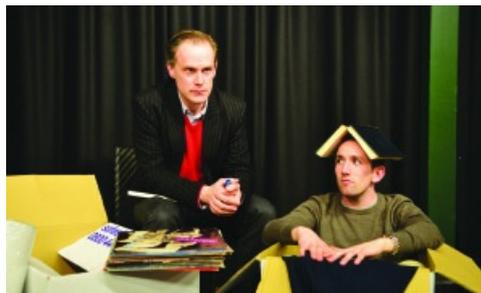


Neil McPherson is fringe theatre's Top Dog. Recently inaugurated into the Hospital Club 100, a shortlist of "the most influential, innovative and interesting people in the creative and media industries", McPherson's work has gained consistent acclaim. His HQ, The Finborough Theatre, is no less adorned. Since its opening in 1980, the theatre has won numerous awards, just this last year, winning London Theatre Reviews' The Empty Space Peter Brook Award 2012. The theatre can also boast helping to jumpstart the careers of many of the industry's big names including actress Rachel Weisz, as well as playwrights James Graham and Laura Wade (who rose to fame with her sell-out production *Posh*, and who recently gave a talk on campus). All this is pretty remarkable for a theatre that's entirely self-funded, off-West-End, and about the size of a large two-bedroom flat. But don't be fooled by its size; this matchstick-box theatre has one of the most exciting line-ups, encompassing everything from race relations in Leeds to homosexuality in the British army.

I spoke to Neil on his way home after a performance of *Somersaults*, one of the current productions at the theatre. Although now boasting 14 years' experience at the Finborough, Neil's directorial path wasn't always as set, as he began his early career acting, with notable appearances "dressed as a polar bear in front of 500 screaming children." Evidently, a change was needed, which propelled him towards directing, (which he admits, he initially "absolutely hated,") and eventually into the lap of the Finborough. It's just as well. As it quickly becomes clear Neil thrives on the unpredictable and versatile nature of his life at the small theatre, saying that, "the nice thing about the Finborough is if you get bored of reading plays you can go do the accounts, if you get bored of those you go do the painting, you get bored doing that you just 'box office' or clean the toilets...there isn't an average day... it's a little bit of everything."

With the task of filling 24 plays a year, Neil is surprisingly evasive when I ask him about his favourite types of work, as he exclaims "Eeeehhh no. Probably not. There are favourite playwrights and favourite plays, probably not one above all others." He is however, more specific about the type of work he doesn't

want to see. In fact, he goes on to describe his feelings of virulent 'hatred' towards those plays which feature "the urban middle class twenty-something 'I'm in a flat, moaning that my life is meaningless, my parents promised me I was special, and my boyfriend's just left me' plays, coupled with child abuse in Act Two." Instead, for him it's about making "genuine discoveries and rediscoveries", which are realised in the theatre's practice of staging plays that are relatively new to the London scene, namely in that haven't been staged "within the last 25 years," with this being crucial to striking the right "balance between new writing and rediscoveries." On the topic of new writing, Neil is demonstrably passionate, particularly with the use of the term 'young', instead preferring 'new', and reasoning that "the problem with the whole of British theatre is that it's all young. So let's say you're a new writer and you're starting out and your 25, it's practically impossible, if you're over 30 totally forget it, if you're over 40 you're having a laugh. Whereas Pack [a recent play at the Finborough] was written by a 52 year old housewife, and that was her first play. So we really strongly feel 'new' shouldn't mean just 'young'. It's about any age group and background whatever, without just being 'Royal Court-y', 'we only take you if you're 16-24' type of thing'.



This talk brings us nicely to discuss Somersaults, one of the Finborough's current productions, which is unusual because of the play being partly performed in Gaelic. Neil is keen to stress the importance of this, particularly in relation to other language driven works, elaborating "it was very important to do that play...If you look at, say, the Globe's World Shakespeare Festival, they did every single language in the world practically, except Gaelic or Welsh or Irish or Manx or Breton or Cornish...you know, all of the indigenous languages of the British Isles didn't get a look in. And in London you never get it, I mean, the Welsh play practically sold out. We've got Hugh Edwards and the First Minister of Wales tweeting about it madly just because nobody ever does that, so from a political point of view we thought it was important to do it." And the Gaelic language isn't the half of it, Somersaults also plays with other conventions with its inclusion of a 5 minute long drinking scene, and a rather raunchy sexual encounter. I wonder at this point if such boundary pushing is an exclusive luxury of Fringe theatre, and one which West End theatre is not privy to. Neil disagrees, citing the West End's very different nature as the reason for their avoidance of such risqué material, saying "I think you could do all that in the west end to be honest, they probably don't because the plays that have all that kind of stuff in them don't get to the west end, but I think you could do it." Something that's really striking about the Finborough is the intimacy of the space and the audience's proximity to actors, that you only really get in fringe theatre. The risks that the Fringe's actors and directors take are heightened by this intimacy, which is also picked up on by Neil, who remarks "if you get spat on by Dame Janet Suzman whilst she's taking her socks off and she's close enough to touch, you don't get that anywhere else."

The Finborough Theatre has won a plethora of awards, which might seem extraordinary for the small size and self-funded institute that it is. One wonders just how such achievement is possible, to which Neil responds with characteristic gusto, saying "oh, well, you just do good plays! There's no magic tablet for it... you do that and you do it consistently. It's quite easy on the fringe to kind of have a huge big success and maybe keep that going for a year, but then reality kicks in and you start diluting it so why we've done well I think is because we manage to get to a level and keep it there."

And the Finborough certainly has. With a future line-up consisting of a play entirely in Welsh, to a play examining the life of women office workers in the 1930s, to a murder mystery involving two detectives - one Israeli, one Palestinian - working together to solve a murder case in the West Bank, the Finborough holds true to its claim to diversity and looks confident to win another wave of awards. Later this year,

'Vibrant', the Finborough Playwright Festival, will also celebrate its 5th year.

But it hasn't been easy. Being entirely self-funded means surviving on tight budgets, requires round-the-clock commitment, and a constant stream of interns. The pressure on small enterprises is perhaps symbolized by the fact that the pub below the theatre has just shut down. But, despite these upsets, somehow, life at the Finborough goes on as usual. Passing by the theatre, one has the distinct feeling that even if the building's foundations were to collapse beneath it, the Finborough would somehow still keep going. As they say, the show must go on. M



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