Creating Stories and Treading the Boards with 2TimeTheatre

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Rachel: Hello, my name's Rachel O'Neill and I'm Managing Director of 2TimeTheatre.

Cecily: And I'm Cecily O'Neill, and I'm Artistic Director of 2TimeTheatre.

Rachel: 2TimeTheatre has been going for about four years, and we are a tiny theatre company, but we're a professional theatre company, and we exist to take dramatic and original stories with a local connection and turn them into gripping pieces of drama.

Cecily: Yes. And we're particularly interested in women's stories, but also we like to adapt existing texts and build on them to create, as Rachel says, original and gripping drama.

Rachel: So if you look back to where we all kicked off, I think it must have been 2016 with your adaptation of 'Venus and Adonis'. Can you tell us a bit about that, Cecily?

Cecily: Yes. It's always wise, if you are adapting work, to choose a very good original and Shakespeare's erotic poem, 'Venus and Adonis' was a best seller in his lifetime, particularly among students and I was commissioned to adapt it by Hyde900, a local group.

They wanted to celebrate the fact that 'Venus and Adonis' is dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, whose family made their money from the destruction of the extremely wealthy Hyde Abbey.

Rachel: And what was his connection with Shakespeare then?

Cecily: Somehow poetry was more respectable than plays…

Rachel: yes…

Cecily: … and so he was seeking a wealthy and influential patron when he dedicated it to Southampton and he had to ask his permission. And he subsequently dedicated 'The Rape of Lucrece' to Southampton as well.

Rachel: So you had to adapt a poem into a piece of drama. How did you go about doing that?

Cecily: Well, the easiest way was to divide it up, it seemed to me. So, as well as the 'Venus and Adonis' reading parts that related to them, there were two voices who acted almost as narrators and filled in the context and the background and the wonderful descriptions. We were supported by a fantastic local group of recorder players, and one of them also a very fine singer, who provided a tremendous atmosphere of playing recorder music of the time.

Rachel: That's right. It's very difficult, isn't it? To create an atmosphere when you're performing in a church space or other heritage spaces. They are often very powerful, very strong buildings in themselves. Whereas obviously theatre spaces, by their very nature, tend to be kind of quite blank in the sense that you can then bring in your set, lights, costumes etc. to create your own imagined world. So that's often a big challenge, isn't it? When working in these often very fabulous spaces, but ones with limitations.

Cecily: Yes. And very often the limitations are to do with appropriate sight lines or lighting or space for movement. And we performed 'Venus and Adonis' initially in St Lawrence Church, which is extremely ancient, and I think one of my favourite places in Winchester, a great sense of tranquillity, but we managed to do it there, but it did have its challenges. But we subsequently performed it at an equally interesting place, St Bartholomew's, and there, oddly enough, we were able to create, I think, a slightly more interesting performance.

Rachel: Hmm. Yes, it is. I mean, obviously spaces do change the way, both with the performers and audience, respond to them.

If we move forward to June 2017 and your adaptation of a famous author, I mean, hopefully some of you have heard of her, called Jane Austen, if you want to tell us about that project.

Cecily: So, 2017 was the great Jane Austen year because it celebrated her death at the unfortunately early age of 42. Her six great novels, of course, are very well known, but what's less well known are her wonderful works of juvenilia, written between the ages of 12 and 18, and which are very, very different. They're full of people getting drunk, people running off, eloping, people stealing …

Rachel: … and fainting …

Cecily: … and fainting …

Rachel: … lots of fainting …

Cecily: … and behaving very badly in general, but very, very, funny and with her absolutely wonderful turn of speech. So, I took some of the juvenilia and turned it into a performance, called 'Meeting Miss Austen', which was performed at the Winchester Discovery Centre, very successfully. I think, again, supported by music.

Rachel: Yes, I was sort of producer role in that, and there was a cast of, I think, seven professional actors, and a professional musician, who created lovely linking music and underscoring as well as some jolly song music to just indicate changes of scene and atmosphere without, again, having the facility or indeed the budget to drag on giant pieces of set or costume changes or whatever.

Cecily: And that was directed by Philip Glassborow, who's a very, very well-known, not just a local writer, but also, with a great deal of experience particularly in radio. And we cooperated on piece a that he'd written called 'Jane Austen and The Waterman'.

Rachel: When was that again? That was just a little bit later, wasn't it? Again, within the Jane Austen celebrations.

Cecily: Absolutely right. And as part of the festival in Southampton, and we were fortunate enough to be able to perform it in, again, a very historic space, the Ballroom at the Dolphin Hotel, where Jane Austen as a young woman had been to various balls and dances.

Rachel: It's so thrilling, isn't it? To actually be in the space where she herself was. So, despite it's now quite corporate atmosphere, again, something significant kind of happens.

From there, we moved back to Winchester, our home. And we have to say, actually, I think it's worth pointing out at this point that not only do we use professional actors and musicians and directors and movement people etc. as much as we can, we always try and make sure, as far as is humanly possible, that they are all from Hampshire, because I think otherwise it's false advertising in a way to call yourself a Hampshire theatre company and then, you know, be bringing people in from all over the place.

Cecily: Absolutely right. And of course, we're tremendously lucky to have a wealth of extremely talented performers and musicians, music groups and actors.

Rachel: Yes, costume makers, all that stuff, really, you know, it's a very rich ground for, for that. But I suppose if we move forward in time, we're going to another anniversary, this is what really kind of kicks us off and gets our creative juices flowing. This is Cecily's idea to me, which was to look at staging Sir Walter Raleigh's treason trial in the Great Hall. Now, normally, of course you can't get access to the Great Hall because it's full of The Crown or some film or other, but via Heritage Open Days, they got us the space for free, on condition we did the performances for free. So we did three performances in that very space, in the amazing Great Hall. What a treat.

Cecily: Yes. And of course, we found it impossible, really, to think of staging the trial, which is very dry, legalistic and long. So you came up, I think with what was a much more human approach, much more, almost domestic, certainly intimate and still stage it in that extraordinary surroundings.

Rachel: Yeah, we were certainly blessed by making a couple of brave decisions. I think one was to not have any scenery at all, not even chairs, nothing. Just absolutely place it on those very flagstones, let the Hall do the work in terms of the atmosphere. But then we were very lucky again, we had the services of a local music group called Courtly Music, doing exquisite Tudor music of the period, including one of Sir Walters' own songs actually.

And, we also, again via Heritage Open Days, had access to Hampshire Wardrobe to pull out some really thrilling costumes. The Armada dress that Queen Elizabeth wore, you know, who needs a set and someone's looking as magnificent as that.

Cecily: Tell us a little bit about the interaction spinnery. It was a three hander.

Rachel: It was a three hander, yes, it was Sir Walter, Elizabeth I and Sir Walter's wife, Bess (full name is Elizabeth) who he married in secret. And I tried to make that, in a way, the fulcrum of the drama, the secret marriage, and how Elizabeth, who was for all her many, many abilities and talents, was very jealous of her favourites and making sure that they didn't go off and marry anyone else was absolutely kind of key to keeping them in line.

I was very much helped by a book by Mathew Lyons called *The Favourite* which detailed his relationship with Elizabeth, and, reading around, you know, his life and, and times.

Obviously a lot of the focus is on being an adventurer and a poet but very little is focused on that domestic interplay and that was what was interesting. And of course, on a practical level, doable.

Cecily: Exactly. And we always have to kind of, cut our cloth rather carefully when it comes to both resources like costumes, but of course again, we're lucky to have the Hampshire Wardrobe, but also numbers of performers and spaces and rehearsal spaces also, we have to include in budgets.

Rachel: That's right. I'm very much indebted to Winchester School of Art, who let us use their spaces for free and the Winchester Discovery Centre, huge supporters of our work.

So we fast forward again, I think, to the following July when, again, this is your project, Cecily. This was about Keats. So if you can tell us what kicked that notion off.

Cecily: Well, again, very significant point in Keats' life when he came to Winchester in search of a library, which unfortunately there wasn't. So, he, however settled here for several months and it was really the last productive period of his life before illness overcame him. And, during the time he was here, he polished some previous stuff he'd done, but also wrote some fantastic new pieces as well, as many, many letters to his friends and relations, particularly to his brother in America, but he wrote here what is called England's favourite poem, 'To Autumn'. And you can almost track his footsteps as he writes this amazing poem.

Rachel: Yes. So inspired by Winchester and by the surrounding countryside. And you delved very deeply into all of that material, but very much, in a way, sort of, perhaps ignoring the commentators on his material and just going right back to the source.

Cecily: Yeah. Back to the letters and poems and …

Rachel: … to capture the man himself …

Cecily: … exactly. And the challenge, again, is to make that work as something to be listened to and viewed as well. Luckily, we were able to hire two young actors, who divided the text between them. One of them was Keats and the other is his friend, Charles Armitage Brown, who was also in Winchester at the time, briefly. But, we did some research a little bit beyond the letters and poems.

Rachel: Yes. We went up to Oxford for a day of Keats-anelia, whatever they call it, but anyway, for various lecturers and experts in Keats and his work at Oxford University. And, through that day, we met Professor Richard Marggraf Turley, who is a Lecturer at Aberystwyth, and he had a very interesting take didn't he on 'To Autumn', which is a powerful piece and looms large in English lyric poetry.

Cecily: Yes. He raised some questions about where these fields were, because of course along the path that Keats used to walk, it's actually water meadows,

Rachel: That's Chesil Hill, which is, obviously where Chesil Street is now, where the wheat would have been grown in the early 1800s. I think he's done a lot of work on this and he's said that the owner of these fields, actually lived opposite. So he was in Chesil Street, looking out his window and making sure that they weren't falling asleep in the field, as is mentioned in the poem.

Cecily: Yes. And Richard also supported us by coming along to the performances and, actually, speaking with Professor Christopher Mulvey, of the English Project, sharing the introduction and responding to questions afterwards. So that made, I think, quite a rich performance. But also, we were supported again, by specially composed music, performed and sung by two local musicians.

Rachel: Yes, again, whereas we can't, say, bring in exciting stage sets and effects and so on, music goes a great way to enhancing and illuminating our productions. That's always been the case right from the start. Keats was very well received. It was in St Lawrence's Church. And, again, so Cecily you're back in St Lawrence's Church, with all its, all its charm and tranquillity and all its issues and problems.

Cecily: In fact, on this occasion, it really worked rather well because it's a very focused piece, very intimate, just two people talking to each other in effect. And, we use the little altar space slightly raised, so sight lines were better and it seemed to work very well indeed. Now our next project brought us, absolutely, a century forward.

Rachel: Yes, it did. It was two centuries almost. This was Tilly and the Spitfires, which I wrote and which was directed actually by Dan O'Neill, and this was, really, again, looking at Hampshire history.

I'd come across the story of Beatrice Shilling, an aeronautical engineer working in Farnborough for BAE, when I had been researching an earlier play about the Air Transport Auxiliary, and specifically the female only, Ferry Pool based in Hamble. And they were ferrying all the different airplanes from factories out to the RAF airfields and so on.

Cecily: So did you do much research on Tilly?

Rachel: Well, it was quite difficult, actually because she, in her own time wrote nothing about herself. She carried on working until the sixties. She was working on supersonic jets by the time she retired. So again, picking up the fact that, you know, we are a female owned and managed theatre company, it's really great to be able to focus on women's stories that sometimes get overlooked or unheard.

Cecily: What kind of person was she?

Rachel: I think she was absolutely no nonsense. She was a workaholic. She was doing 14/15/16 hour days when they were trying to solve the problem with the Spitfires, which was, in the early versions of them, that they used to cut out when they went into dives and obviously would dive in order to evade Luftwaffe, you know, fighter planes.

So, she solves the problem very elegantly and simply with a little washer that became known as Miss Shillings Orifice. And so the play was really, again, not about her in the workshop again, cause that would have involved a cast of thousands, but looking at her relationship with an imagined lodger or an imagined friend called Muriel, and using the facts in her story to kind of springboard off of.

It was hard to get to the research. I had to go to the Imperial War Museum twice in order to look at her biography, it is just the one. And again, frustratingly, tends to sort of veer off into stories about her husband who flew Lancaster Bombers.

Cecily: To bring her to life, as a person, in a way, other than her achievements which were clearly considerable, there was some men's voices in there.

Rachel: Yes. We rather cleverly got round the difficulty of rather then casting two men to be in it for one short scene, I had the girls act out what it would have been like for the Air Minister and the Head of Production at BAE, to try to talk about this solution to the problem of the Spitfires, and that became quite a fun, comic scene. And again, we use music, but not live music, but music of the period to indicate transitions and times moving on, or to indicate maybe at the mood of the scene that was coming up. But yes, of course the Spitfire in itself is such an emblematic and iconic thing, not just for the UK, but very specifically for Hampshire because of being manufactured in Eastleigh and Southampton.

Cecily: And of course there was the Shadow Factory that was done down at Southampton.

Rachel: At the NST, yes. That opened up this fabulous new theatre space, which we've had the privilege of putting shows on within their research and development strand. We've been there two years running. Hopefully, you know, it may come back again. Obviously, the NST has gone through a rough old time, as have many other theatres.

Cecily: You had to perform Tilly and the Spitfires in the Winchester Discovery Centre?

Rachel: Yes, that's right. Whilst it's not a heritage space, it does allow, again, perhaps more flexibility in terms of suggesting an environment, which we just did simply with a few pieces of furniture and again, costumes, courtesy of Hampshire Wardrobe, and in the performance style, people spoke differently, they moved differently, but that made a nice contrast with Tilly, who was a much more relaxed and confident and did not subscribe perhaps to the more usual behaviours of women in those expected in the forties and especially during war time.

Cecily: I wonder if she came across a great deal of sexism in that line and in that field, she must have been a little bit unusual, shall we say?

Rachel: Well, she clearly was very gifted engineer.

So that was great to be able to cover her the story and bring her to the attention of people who knew nothing about her. Unlike of course, Keats, Austen and Sir Walter Raleigh, these are known people, but this was a lesser known and we even move further into the territory of unheard, unsung, unvisited voices and lives with your next project.

Cecily: Yes. So, Lewd Women and Female Felons was the next project and that arose from some research that had been done by Hyde900 and Southampton University, where they actually published a fascinating pamphlet dealing with the development of the Hampshire County Bridewell.

Rachel: And that’s not a prison, is it?

Cecily: It was a prison for lesser offenders, for people who’d run away from their employers or were poachers or were just vagrants, just people who were not fitting in, in some way. And among them were the women who were sentenced to a term prison in the Bridewell, often for a year at a time because they had babies outside wedlock and were not able to support them.

Rachel: And were they called lewd women? Was that their crime?

Cecily: Yes. Yes. That was their crime. Sometimes it was called the crime of bastardy. But, in effect, they had illegitimate children.

Rachel: But they weren't necessarily sex workers or prostitutes?

Cecily: Absolutely not. Very often they were just farm workers or, you know, orphan girls with no family to support them or protect them. So their sentences were harsh. Often, they were either pregnant when they were sent to the Bridewell, where conditions weren't as bad as they were in the other prisons, but they were not exactly restful, I wouldn't think, and often with very young infants.

Rachel: Right. What would happen to them once they were there?

Cecily: Well, they were often sentenced, almost always sentenced, to 12 months with hard labour and that could consist of a number of not particularly pleasant tasks. And they could be sentenced without a trial and, in fact were, all it needed was a couple of magistrates who would punish them in this way.

Rachel: And how did you stage it? Was there much about, I mean there was stuff about them, but was there any, any voices, any drama that you could find?

Cecily: Well, there was a huge amount of detail about their crimes and their dates of birth and death and, you know, sometimes a little more detail in the Hampshire Record Office and I was lucky to have a great deal of support from various researchers. But, the challenge was, when I came to look at it, that beyond names and numbers and details of sentences, there were no stories, there was nothing to flesh out the, the backgrounds or lives of these women.

Rachel: So how did you go about making that of interest to the audience?

Cecily: Well, in a way, the limitations of the sort of work we do means that you can come up with inventive, and I hope, entertaining and interesting and informative solutions.

So, I created three characters representing, in effect, three attitudes. One would be the prison chaplain, so he would be giving the sort of church view of things. The second male character was a local landowner who would have been a magistrate and the third was a female reformer, I was thinking along the lines of Elizabeth Fry, who did a great deal of work bringing the dreadful conditions in prison to light.

Rachel: And that worked, in terms of, that you then had a bit of conflict and a bit of justification on one side, or a plea for clemency on the other side, and this was all done with the faces of the women ranged at the back of the room and, you know ....

Cecily: So how to give them a voice then arose. So, I looked at a lot of ballads of the period and, often which begin in quite a jaunty way and end up with the women being abandoned by their lovers. So, I created about six songs. A couple of them were left as they were, very poignant songs, and the others I kept the tune but altered the words. And we had six singers who sang acapella, led by a couple of wonderful folk singers. And it was in that kind of mode and that genre. And, it was very, very moving, particularly when we did it in St Bartholomew's, to know that the bodies of the women and some of their children lay outside in the graveyard and inside we were singing their stories and telling their tales.

Rachel: Well, that's pretty much where we've got to with our work so far, in a few short years. And what does next year hold for 2TimeTheatre, Cecily?

Cecily: Well, I'm sure it holds something. And, you know, we've been both toying with some ideas, I know. But again, looking at the women's stories, there are three women that particularly interest me who have local connections. One in particular who spent all of her life in Hampshire, in Romsey, Charlotte Young, who was a best-selling novelist throughout the 19th century. Very rarely read now, but very interesting as she had kind of quite a quiet life and Mary Sumner who founded the Mothers' Union. And of course, the best known of the three, Florence Nightingale.

Rachel: Again, all Hampshire born and bred.

Cecily: Absolutely. And with totally different lifestyles, totally different reactions to the world they found themselves in.

Rachel: And what they've left the world as well. You know, the effect they had. From women's rights to modern day nursing,

Cecily: So, I'm sure there's lots to be done there. And, you know, we'll see what the year brings.

Rachel: Well, I hope you've enjoyed this podcast for HistBites and we here at 2TimeTheatre look forward to welcome you all to our next production, whenever or wherever that might be. So it's goodbye from me, Rachel.

Cecily: Goodbye from me, Cecily.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.