

Going Out > Theatre

# Issy van Randwyck, interview: 'I don't know the London literati. I just have ideas'

For actress and singer Issy van Randwyck, starting a festival that links the worlds of drama and literature seemed a natural step, she tells Nick Curtis

NICK CURTIS | Friday 11 March 2016 | 0 comments



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Five years ago, actress and singer Issy van Randwyck was pregnant with her second daughter and she and her husband Edward Hall, artistic director of Hampstead Theatre, “went to a literary festival, to support our friend Polly Samson [wife

**of Pink Floyd's David Gilmour]. We thought: 'This is a wonderful thing but there is nothing like this that straddles all the arts, that discusses process, writing, the page to stage element'. We thought: 'Well, we are interested in that, maybe other people will be.'"**

The result, four years on, was the first ever festival at Hampstead Theatre, which grew from a planned nine events to more than 30 that filled every nook and cranny of the Swiss Cottage venue one March weekend last year, and drew in 2,500 punters.

This year, the festival is back with the Evening Standard as a partner and an even more impressive range of participants including playwright David Hare, choreographer Matthew Bourne, ballerina and Strictly star Darcey Bussell, authors Deborah Moggach and Kate Mosse and polymath Meera Syal. Not to mention Paul O'Grady and local resident (and Hampstead Theatre supporter) Gary Kemp.

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There are Lego and Mac make-up workshops for the young and not so young, masterclasses in how to write a novel, a screenplay or a newspaper column, but also a discussion of censorship in the arts that touches on Hall's current production of actor Phil Davis's play Firebird at Trafalgar Studios, which deals with the sexual grooming of children. "We are moving into edgy areas," says van Randwyck, 53, "but these are things I think we should talk about."

**'There is nothing like this ... that discusses process, writing, the page to stage element'**

As a new-writing venue, Hampstead has put on contentious plays such as Howard Brenton's Drawing the Line, about the partition of India, and The Arrest of Ai Weiwei, about the celebrated and persecuted Chinese artist, both of which were live-streamed to huge audiences internationally (Ai Weiwei himself even managed to break through China's internet firewall to watch the latter).

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Although the festival is separately funded, its job is to illuminate, celebrate and expand upon the work the theatre has done in the six years since Hall took over and restored its cutting-edge reputation, eradicating a crippling deficit and staging such hits as Nina Raine's Tiger Country, David Lindsay-Abaire's Good People and Mike Bartlett's adaptation of Chariots of Fire.

Recently, van Randwyck points out, Hare's The Moderate Soprano and a revival of Tom Stoppard's Hapgood were box-office hits.

The festival itself is not run for profit, tickets are cheap and – van Randwyck confirms – unlike at some literary festivals all those taking part are paid an honorarium of £100. Not huge but better than Equity's minimum wage for actors.



Taking centre stage: Van Randwyck with her husband, Hampstead Theatre artistic director Edward Hall

Van Randwyck seems slightly bemused to find the whole thing resting on her gamine shoulders. "I'm an actress, so this is not my metier," she frowns. "I don't know all the north London literati. I

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just have ideas.”

Her husband is of course a conduit to stage talents such as Hare, Brenton and designers and actors who will take part in talks or workshops, and the festival has a steering committee that includes luminaries such as Mosse, Penny Smith, Raffaella Barker and Kathy Lette, who do seem to know pretty much everyone.

Van Randwyck's own resourcefulness is arguably proved by a career scattered with steep learning curves. She was in Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* at the National Theatre for a year and in the disastrous Norwegian musical *Which Witch?* for a very short time. “Hilarious,” she recalls. “There was a diplomatic incident [when it closed after terrible reviews] and the possibility that there would be no Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square.” She has recorded with Larry Adler, spent five years with the cabaret troupe *Fascinating Aida* and 18 months as “the only real woman” in the drag queen troupe at the much-mourned Soho gay cabaret *Madame JoJo's*. She has produced her own shows, was in *The Danish Girl* “for about a minute” and appeared in her husband's production of *A Further Education* in Hampstead's studio theatre recently.

## **‘I have very strong feelings about being Dutch. We'd be barking mad to leave the EU’**

She is sensitive to suggestions of nepotism, not least because Hall – son of former RSC and National Theatre supremo Sir Peter and half-brother to actress Rebecca – has been battling away similar snipes all his professional life. “Working with Ed, whatever the part, it's got to be really, really right,” she says. “Because it not only puts huge stress on Ed but the rest of the theatre staff, who work damn hard, and the board.” Fortunately, she says, her husband is “cool under fire”.

Does working on the festival together drive them nuts? “It drives our children nuts,” she replies. Their elder daughter Georgia complains that they can't have a single car journey without talking about work. (Her sister, Savannah, four, was going to be called Perdita, after the lost child in *The Winter's Tale* – “she is our lost child, because she was so hard to conceive” – but Georgia objected, so the family picked Savannah's name out of an atlas. The family live in Streatham, far from glitzy, literary north London.)

“Work is our common ground,” van Randwyck continues. “That and elderly fathers.” She recently brought her father, who is 92 and suffering from prostate cancer, over to England from his home in Italy when it became clear that he could no longer look after himself. He is currently in respite care.

Sir Peter Hall, now 85, was diagnosed with dementia in 2011 and is being cared for as a paying guest at the Charterhouse, the



almshouse in a former Carthusian monastery near Smithfield. “He’s happy,” says van Randwyck. “He’s well looked after and that’s good. But at weekends we ping-pong between the both of them.”

By birth, van Randwyck is a Dutch baroness but she was born in Hong Kong and educated in England. There’s no manor house or estate, she explains: the family pile, Het Slot, near Utrecht, was seriously damaged in the war and taken over by the government.

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Her father fled to England during hostilities, was interned, enlisted in what sounds like the Dutch version of the Merchant Navy on his release, and caught the end of the conflict in the Pacific, subsequently going into shipping. Issy and her two brothers had titles but Issy forfeited hers when she married.

“Ed’s thrilled, as he’s a republican,” she says. “But I do have very strong feelings about being Dutch and still have a Dutch passport. And personally I think we would be barking mad to leave the EU.”

Urban festivals seem to be taking off: the Radio Times got in on the act with a weekend bash at Hampton Court last year, and the Southbank Centre now has a rolling programme of themed celebrations. “The appeal is that on one day, or on a number of days, you can see everything that interests you,” says van Randwyck.

What is the future for the festival at Hampstead Theatre? She is cautious about it getting any bigger: it must complement and not

impede the work of the theatre itself. "But we have more than 30 events over the space of these few days, which is pretty amazing anyway," she marvels. Indeed it is.

*The Festival at Hampstead Theatre, NW3*  
([thefestivalathampsteadtheatre.com](http://thefestivalathampsteadtheatre.com)) runs from March 18-20

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