

RE-THINKING THE BARBICAN

Simon Tait talks to the centre's artistic director

A year after he started, Graham Sheffield is now the second longest serving artistic director of The Barbican Centre. His predecessor, Ken Richardson, Baroness O'Cathain's 'square peg in a round hole', lasted three months.

But the job is different now. The artistic director had been expected to be no more than an administrator with little control over what went before the paying public. The new man was expected to be his own man, and his influence on what appears is being felt.

He has introduced new promoters to the centre, to bring Womad in December, for instance, and a Colombian season. He won't countenance a drop in artistic standards, and would rather see a business conference in the Barbican Theatre than a low quality arts event: 'probably something I wouldn't have said a year ago.'

But a year ago there was still a feeling that you couldn't say much at the Barbican. 'The main thing we've achieved in this year is the freeing up of the atmosphere around here, so people feel they can talk about things,' Sheffield says. 'The atmosphere was very tight and I felt very constricted at first - it was inevitable, people had had such an awful time.'

His appointment last year, from being music director for the South Bank Centre, was oddly timed, being made before that of his boss, the Barbican's managing director John Tusa, who wasn't to arrive for another two months (and shortly afterwards be off for six weeks after emergency surgery, setting back the process of change somewhat).

'Yes, I would have preferred it if John had



Graham Sheffield

been in place when I came, but not much about the Barbican has been logical for a few years. I did ask who was on the cards before I took the job and there were one or two names besides John's: I could have worked with any of them.'

In fact, he already knew Tusa: they are North London neighbours, and their rapport has continued. 'We have our friendly disagreements: we have robust exchanges about certain dance companies, for instance. But in the end we each know what our job is.'

What has happened is that the Barbican Centre is at last, after nearly 15 years, emerging as an entity in itself. There seemed a determination to avoid that in the past, so that one didn't recognise a Barbican brand; only the brands, like the Royal Shakespeare Company and the London Symphony Orchestra, within it.

Not only had there been no artistic director for over a year when he arrived, there was no education department and no sponsorship programme.

And there seemed no recognition of the huge diversity of the activities of the centre and how they might relate to each other. He and Tusa have made some key appointments to correct some of that: Bryn Ormerod has been brought from The Forum in Kentish Town to run foyer events; Robert Van Leer has come from the Lincoln Centre and more recently the Wigmore Hall to be music director; Lynn Foster has been lured from the United States to head up sponsorship; Robert Cogo Fawcett from Bath Theatre Royal is executive producer.

There is a distinctly youthful and businesslike character about the latest two appointments: the new commercial director, Mark Taylor from the London Arena, is 34, and Ruth Hasnip who comes from the hotel industry to begin as director of public affairs at the end of this month, is 27. 'They make me feel old at 44; John must feel like Methuselah.'

The art gallery has mounted increasingly varied programmes under Sheffield's encouragement this past year, and the foyer displays have also taken an upturn.

'Before, you could virtually rent space here, and frankly a lot of what went on show was Hyde Park railings stuff. We want new work here, and we want to throw off the image of being just a bucket shop.'

And you can buy some of the exhibits now. 'There was no proper retail outlet for selling any of the beautiful works of art here. Some merchandising is crap, I know, but not to do anything is just stupid.'

The Barbican Cinema, one of the best cinema spaces in London, Sheffield says, needs to lift its profile, which is still subdued despite the continued programming successes of its director, Robert Ryder.

Recently it has had the first London showings of *Twister*, *Independence Day* and the Gwyneth Paltrow *Emma*. 'Robert is extremely adept at programming. Film is the most important art form of the 20th century actually, and it should be treated as such. We're bloody lucky to have it under our roof.'

As well as creating an education department - a feasibility study is under way - and pressing on with the stalled new signing system the Barbican regime is keen to involve neighbours more than before. These include artistic neighbours such as the Guildhall School - 'remember it's not just the school of music, it's the school of music and drama' - but the great City institutions and

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PUBLISHED BY RHINEGOLD PUBLISHING LTD,
241 SHAFTESBURY AVENUE,
LONDON WC2H 8EH

Telephone Advertising: 0171-333 1733
Editorial: 0171-333 1749
Fax: 0171-333 1769
Subscriptions 01474 334500

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Registered as a newspaper at the Post Office.

On other pages

2: VICTORIA GREGORY'S WEEK
and NEW IN POST

3: KEVIN STEPHENS on NEWCASTLE'S
UNIVERSITY GALLERY

4: FLY and MIRRORS

5: KEITH DIGGLE'S MARKETING NOTES
and IAN McMILLAN'S PS

corporations. There is, after all, an increasingly successful City of London Festival which has almost no manifestation at the Barbican Centre, and conference facilities to die for.

Neighbours also include other London boroughs, most of which feel the Barbican is not for them. Talks have opened up with Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Islington to disabuse them of that.

The theatre is Sheffield's first priority, however. Next year the RSC will halve its tenancy of the Barbican Theatre to go on the road for six months, a challenge he says he relishes. 'I knew of the RSC's decision before I came, and quite honestly it was one of the reasons I took the job,' he said, and he is already preparing £2 million plans to make the theatre versatile enough to do justice to dance and to musical events.

He doesn't see long seasons of plays to fill the RSC gap, but short one-off events, perhaps 50 or 60 of them. These could tie in with other events happening in the foyers, the art gallery or the concert hall. This would certainly include dance – a sprung floor is being built – and the acoustic is to be adjusted for music. This might include



Ruth Hasnip: youthful and businesslike appointment

some opera, site-specific productions rather than ought-in ones, and the space is ideal for Handel, for instance.

'I want to create an opportunity for people to cross over from one art form to another without suspicion, one of the things I was keen on at the South Bank,' he says. There should be more international theatre of the type that gets a good run in the Edinburgh Festival but all too little showing in London. 'You can do theatre planning here in a way you haven't been able to in this country.'

He also wants to encourage more outdoor events, something that it was feared would annoy Barbican residents more than it would attract audiences. 'I have an idea it might be interesting to do an outdoor festival entirely based on silence,' and he might be serious.

Sheffield wants a permanent festival feel about the Barbican, which is already beginning to show. 'There has been a lot of anti-Barbican prejudice in the past,' he says. 'Give us the chance to rethink.'

MY WEEK

by Victoria Gregory, Chief Executive,
The Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

Monday

Press interest in the opening reaching fever pitch with requests for interviews, photographs, filming and tours of the building. The public respond in ever increasing numbers; the Box Office is under siege and we have to send in emergency deliveries of food and coffee to keep them going. Our Box Office phones won't let the staff log out while there's still customers queuing on the line and it becomes almost impossible to close!

Tuesday

It all begins to seem real as deliveries of food and drink start arriving. Will we really get through all that champagne? 7.00pm: training session for the new bars and catering staff to prepare them for the onslaught to come – poor things haven't got a clue what they're walking into... Maybe opening a new concert hall and doing a high profile function for 700 guests on the same night was a mite foolhardy. We manage to get away at about 11pm after playing James Brown very loudly in the office to convince ourselves that we all 'feel good'.

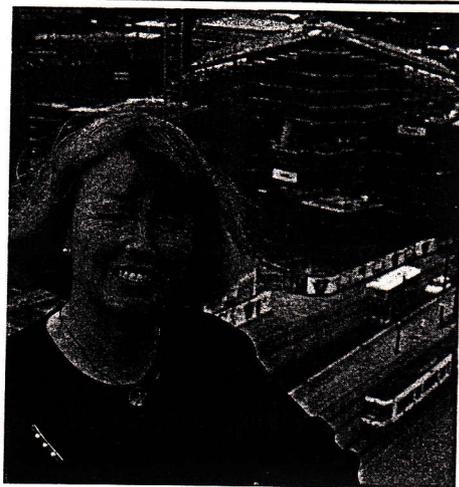
Wednesday

The day arrives. All the last minute crises crop up as the operation shifts up into top gear – flowers not arrived, wheelchair seats not removed etc. The sign for the Hallé's sponsors falls down hours before the event as it's too heavy for its fittings. A hastily made replacement is erected minutes before the managing director walks into the building. A baptism of fire ensues for all the staff – the Finance Director ends up behind the bar, the Box Office Manager ends up clearing tables. By 2.00am we have survived the carnage but everybody is in a state of shock. Everybody grabs a stiff drink and I plead with them to come back tomorrow.

NEW IN POST

□ Succeeding Paul Iles (of AMW's *Iles Files* fame), Stephen Barry has accepted the mantle of general manager of the Edinburgh Festival Theatre and will take up the post in January. Chief executive of Sheffield Theatres for the last six years. Stephen was previously director of the Bath Theatre Royal, artistic director of Farnham's Redgrave Theatre and artistic director of the National Theatre in Perth, Western Australia. He is currently a member of the ACE dance panel and a director of Touring Partnership, Theatre Royal Presentations and Phoenix Dance Company.

□ AMW's correspondent in the north east, Kevin Stephens has been appointed artistic director of the Hexham Abbey Festival, to follow Howard Layfield who is leaving to devote more time to the Association of British Choral Directors. Kevin, who is a longstanding contributor to several of Rhinegold's periodicals, has just retired after 19 years as a music lecturer. Prior to that he was music



Thursday

The evening goes a lot more smoothly – maybe because the staff now know what to expect. However, the shorter second half means that we only have 35 minutes to put out and prepare tables for 200 people. I kick off my stilettos and start polishing cutlery.

Friday

Everyone in a state of shock following a critical assassination in *The Times*. Was this guy at the same concert? We choose to make our judgements on the innumerable phone calls, faxes and bouquets that keep arriving in congratulation.

Saturday

After three concerts by the Hallé, this is the opening concert of the Hall's own International Orchestra Series, a visit by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. A slight panic as we hear that a fire on the line at Euston is delaying trains, but thankfully Chicago's charter gets through on time. The concert is something that will live long in the memories of all who were there – Barenboim's emotional return to Manchester after 24 years; a 15 minute standing ovation after an encore of *Nimrod* that left not a dry eye in the house, with Lady Evelyn Barbirolli leading the applause in the front row of the circle. It doesn't get much better than this

officer to Northern Arts and he has also worked in theatre, arts centres and broadcasting. His first festival in Hexham will be in September next year, its 45th year.

□ The West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds is about to have a vacant press office. Ian Rowley, head of press and public relations, will be moving out in mid-November to take up a similar post with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford upon Avon. Before then, at the end of September, Vanessa Choudhury is due to move to the Royal National Theatre to become press officer for its education work.

□ After a long wait for the appointment of a new artistic director (during which time it has been nannied by Ruth Mackenzie and Michael Bogdanov), Theatr Clwyd in Mold has instead appointed an artistic consultant. He is Terry Hands, one of the co-founders of the Liverpool Everyman and subsequently artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company.