

# New listeners start here...

Graham Sheffield is the new arts director of the Barbican Arts Centre. He came from a successful stint at the South Bank to a place regarded by many as a concrete wilderness, better known in recent times for its management upheavals than its artistic output. We asked him why

Graham Sheffield shrugs wryly when he is reminded that he recently described one of the routes into the Barbican as being "like going into a nuclear bunker" and some of the recent refurbishment carried out in the centre as "frightful".

He admits now that, having been in the job since September, the concrete buildings are growing on him. The spaces are giving him ideas, he says. "You can't come in with preconceived notions. I'd rather work on a vision from within rather than bringing it in from outside and imposing it."

Sheffield's brief at the Barbican is to build on its established reputation and further develop the centre's artistic vision in conjunction with its resident companies - the LSO and Royal Shakespeare Company - and the Guildhall School of

Music and Drama, also based in the Barbican.

He is responsible for the planning and implementation of the centre's programme of music, cinema, visual arts and its multi-disciplinary festivals.

A musician by training, and a former BBC producer, for the last five years he has been at London's South Bank complex, first as music projects director then as music director. By all accounts successfully and happily. So what was it about the Barbican job that tempted him to move?

## Attractive

"The attraction at the Barbican Centre was of being able to work in other art forms as well as music. I have always been very interested in cinema, theatre and the visual arts."

But was he not deterred by its reputation for managerial

shenanigans and low morale? He dismisses in one sentence the events which led up to the abrupt departure, with golden handshake, of previous Barbican Centre MD Baroness O' Cathain, to be followed as acting MD by City of London Chamberlain Bernard Harry. "There were some difficult times until Bernard arrived," he observes.

"The people here at the Barbican have proved very friendly and supportive," Sheffield continues. "They are willing to help build a new team - it's very exciting." His face lights up with enthusiasm. "I hope that we will be able to communicate that excitement to the public."

The possibility of widening his experience was not the only attraction of the Barbican Centre for this former BBC 3 Radio producer. Before his own appointment was finalised, Sheffield was told that John Tusa - whom he had known from the BBC - was among those being considered for the position of Barbican Centre managing director. Sheffield says he had an instinctive feel that the two of them would get on.

The other important fact he was informed of before he took up office was the "bombshell" decision by the RSC to tour for six months of the year - leaving empty the Barbican theatre and the Pit, which were originally custom-designed for them.

Sheffield was not phased by this revelation. In fact he appears positively to relish the

## Opportunity

opportunity it affords him to widen the Barbican's artistic potential during the vacant half-year. At the same time, he pays tribute to the achievements of the RSC. "The RSC still have a great deal to offer and I hope we still have a lot to offer them."

Various parties have been coming to the centre to look over the Barbican theatre and the Pit, with a view to performing there in the RSC's touring season. Sheffield laughs. "I feel like an estate agent, taking them round and pointing out all the features. He gestures. "And here we have an orchestra pit for 45..."

Representatives from dance, theatre, opera and music companies have been to see what is available. "They were all impressed by

the facilities and the quality of the space. It's intimate and has a contemporary feel to it. Top quality international theatre companies will love it."

He warms to this theme. "We could establish the Barbican as London's international festival theatre with the quality of work we would be able to put on here. London does not have regular visits from top international theatre companies. We could provide a forum for that."

Sheffield has also been talking to regional companies. "They have been doing some excellent work." But in the end it looks like a varied programme. "We will probably run a series of short seasons over the six months that the RSC is not here," he concludes, "focused on drama, but with elements of contemporary dance and music theatre."

The Corporation of London has indicated its willingness to finance the alterations which will be necessary to make the facilities suitable for use by companies other than the RSC. The intention is to carry out some alterations to the theatre during the first few months of the RSC's absence.

At what sort of cost? "It will run into the millions - but not, I suspect many millions.

We have to make the stage variable to flatten out the rake that was put on it for the RSC. We will install a sprung floor for dance. We might also refurbish the seating.

"We will have the latest in audio equipment for simultaneous

RSC - will determine my artistic planning."

He admits that he misses the South Bank - "a fantastic place" - but insists he has no regrets at leaving it. "I've been given the opportunity to make the Barbican more than the sum of its parts. The integration of

finding the way around easier? "I've found that the people who come here seem actually to like it here, rather than to come despite the surroundings!" He smiles. "But I'd like significantly to expand our audience base."

"The new signage is



translation, so we can have Noh or Kabuki theatre, for example. We might have surtitles built in. There will be acoustic work, too, to make it more suitable for music.

"We are also looking at the Pit. We could double the size if we could include the rehearsal room next door. That would give a 350-seater. It's about 200 to 220 at present, which isn't a very good size in economic terms."

He sums up. "The decision on all that - and the deal with the

the disparate bits is one of the most interesting aspects of the job.

"We can create subtler links here than with theme festivals. Look at the Carrington exhibition alongside Carrington, the film. The collection of artistic disciplines at the Barbican Centre is unique - the Lincoln Center apart, perhaps - full scale theatre, film, music, visual arts.

Is he happy with the exterior appearance of the Barbican Centre and the effectiveness of the recent efforts to make

not enough of an improvement - I still bump into people who are lost! John Tusa - who took up the post of MD in November - feels that we can come in with two fresh pairs of eyes and see where improvements still have to be made."

"I have an out-of-the-box policy," he continues. "I'd like to take more activities outside and to mix them up, to humanise the place with public art in the public spaces, to make it more of an arts quarter. We can make the pieces



movable – after all, fashions in art change.

"I'd like to give areas over to certain artists for just two years or so. It's a development of the Tate idea of rehanging things regularly to make people notice them again.

"We have to look at anything that would improve the quality of the environment, but we must work within the 'grain' of the buildings. The Barbican is a powerful, direct piece of architecture. We shouldn't try to prettify it – it has its own integrity."

Sheffield frowns. "We have to find ways of making it more accessible, of removing obstacles, both physical and mental, to people coming here." He relates the story of a child at a recent City of London Sinfonia education event who com-

### **Powerful**

mented, "I didn't know children were allowed in here." Sheffield clearly finds this unacceptable.

"There's a certain formality about the building and its operation that we need to loosen. It can't be done overnight, but we need to break down the perception that it's some kind of 'temple'. This is not to imply any kind of compromise on artistic standards," he stresses.

"The Barbican Centre does not have

strong relationships with the neighbouring boroughs. We're going to begin an audience development programme to increase knowledge of what we're doing here and expand our audience base." An education study has recently been carried out for the Barbican which, Sheffield says, shows "a huge amount of enthusiasm generated".

He himself does not evince much enthusiasm for the foyer visual arts spaces.

He is clearly looking forward to working with John Tusa, with whom he says he shares an anarchic sense of humour. They also share "a respect for the bottom line". Sheffield observes, "We both have a strong sense of values: if something is worth doing, we will find a way of making it happen."

Sheffield says he enjoyed working with Bernard Harty, who takes up an expanded portfolio on his return in January to the City Corporation as Chamberlain of London and Town Clerk. "I found his attitude very refreshing. He provided a non-arts pair of eyes, which was very useful, and was very good at seeing through anything phoney.

"I think it's very good from the Barbican point of view to have

someone in the Corporation with that level of understanding of the activities here. The solidity of the City's support for us has been remarkable – it's our responsibility to deliver something back."

Sponsorship is vital for the Barbican, Sheffield thinks. A new

### **Humour**

appointment has been created as head of sponsorship which, he says, speaks for itself. "The more the City like what we are doing, the more likely it is to increase funding – that has been the case with the LSO and the RSC. Success

has bred success," he says.

Sheffield admits that the security of the Barbican Centre's funding was another factor which attracted him to the job. In contrast, the South Bank is funded by the Arts Council which, he says, is "subject to the whims of central government".

His own contract is unusual for arts administration in that it is not for a fixed term. Asked to look into the future and predict where he thinks he will be in five years' time, Sheffield pauses for thought. "I would like to be still here," he replies.



Restaurant and Wine Bar

**With our authentic Piedmontese and Northern Italian cuisine, complemented by the best original wines, we welcome both business diners and City residents.**

The restaurant is 50 metres along Whitecross Street from the Barbican Centre and is open at lunchtime and evenings from Monday to Friday.

107 Whitecross Street, London EC1  
Tel 0171 588 1798