

'Finding the toilet's easy'

Graham Sheffield joined the Barbican in 1995 as artistic director and he's no more immune to the building's quirks than anyone else. So who better to answer some choice questions from the *Time Out* critics about London's most intriguing and infuriating institution?

What was the Barbican originally intended for, and what is it for now?

It was intended to fill a large hole in the City of London after the war – the largest piece of urban regeneration in the UK. It was built to provide arts facilities for local residents, but I don't think the people who planned it had any idea that it would become an artistic centre on the scale that it has.

How well does it achieve its aims?

I'd like to think it does so pretty well; it's one of the world's great cultural institutions, and that's in the words of other people, not me. The most encouraging sign is the audiences; we're getting more people coming, and more people coming more often. But I'm wary of pats on the back.

Why do you think the Barbican provokes so much debate among Londoners?

Whenever there are polls of people's most-loved and most-hated buildings, the Barbican tends to appear in both. I think that's great; the building itself provokes debate. That goes through to the work we put on: challenging, innovative work that will provoke a debate, which is a good thing.

If you were allowed to make one change to the architecture, what would it be?

Well, we've already done it: we've put on a front door, which has been successful and well-received. I suppose now that we've strengthened and clarified the northern aspect of the building, I'd like to do the same for the east, west and south.

What are your favourite buildings in London?

I like a mixture of classical and modern. I like St Paul's, Kenwood House, and St Pancras. I also like Richard Rogers' buildings, Nick Grimshaw's Waterloo station, and Foster's Gherkin has done more than any other building to redefine London's skyline. The Barbican took 20 years to be accepted. I think the British can be ambivalent about new architecture, which means compromises are made; you end up with buildings that say nothing about the time when they were made.

Has the building ever surprised you in the way it's affected a work of art there?

Yes. In our first season without the RSC, Deborah Warner put on 'The Turn of the Screw' (1997). She stripped out everything behind the proscenium, so the whole backstage area was opened up. It gave it an epic quality. Deborah did a similar thing with 'Julius Caesar'.

Do the odd-shaped spaces at the Barbican constrain the artists?

You've got to take account of the aesthetics. It chal-



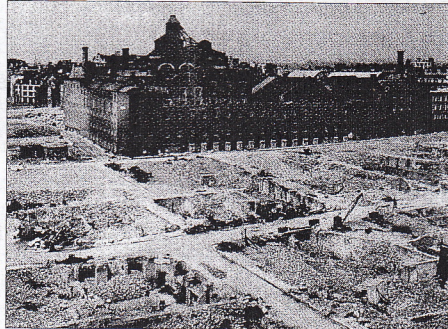
Deborah Warner's 'Julius Caesar'



Graham Sheffield



'Biped'



The derelict postwar site of the future centre

lenges artists, and in some case it inspires them, but it doesn't have to constrain; it only does that if you let it. In some ways, because it's not a black box or a white cube, you have to fight the building.

The acoustics in the Hall have been criticised. How do you defend against that?

There hasn't been a complaint for a while. The Hall had major faults, which were partially rectified in 1994. By 2000 or 2001, they had been completely rectified, and now not only do people not complain but we get compliments on the acoustics. So I don't need to defend it – it's been fixed.

Doesn't running thematic programmes mean shoehorning disparate strands into one building for the sake of it?

The short answer is 'no', but it is all too easy to get ensnared and try and fit everything into one

theme. With the best festivals, natural links between different art forms appear, and you don't have to force the issue.

If you had to watch one Barbican production for eternity, which one would it be?

One would be the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's 'Biped' [1999]. It was a multi-depth, multi-technology production with real dance alongside 'virtual' dance; the movements were translated simultaneously on to a screen, and it never repeated itself. There's also Robert Wilson's 'The Black Rider', which was a brilliant piece of black comedy.

Have you ever got lost inside the venue?

Of course, everybody does! These days we've got new signage and better orientation, so we don't get nearly so many complaints. It's a bit of a cliché now, but it's still an initiation ceremony, finding yourself in one of the car parks and wondering how on earth you're going to make your way back. It's the Barbican adventure.

If your statue was put up at the Barbican, where would you like it to be sited?

The conductor's rostrum in the Hall. It's the only way I'm ever going to get to conduct an orchestra.

What will the Barbican be like in 25 years?

I hope that we'll be able to continue on an upward curve, and I like to see us more out in the community and leading the agenda. Do I have a

'How do you come to love such an unlovely place? I must find myself twice a week at the Barbican – and after almost 20 years of living in London, the Centre still looks like the setting for one of Kieslowski's films about life in a particularly bleak Warsaw tower block. But once inside, I forget about the reinforced concrete realities of the design and find myself constantly thinking: For sheer quality, eclecticism and excellence, this must be the greatest cultural centre going.' Douglas Kennedy, writer

winning formula? I think so, but I'm not telling you what it is. The fact is, you can't just stick to what you're doing. Everything's changing – from the art we create, to how we proselytise it, to how we sell tickets – so you have to be light on your feet. Somebody said recently that the Barbican is a big institution that behaves like a small one, and I'm happy with that.

Finally, where are the toilets?

Finding the toilets is easy. Simply follow the brilliant, logical and very clear new signage.