

The List

What's on locally in June and July

COMPILED BY
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BACK TO LIFE

Adelle Stripe tells us about her fascination with Andrea Dunbar ahead of a Bristol theatre production of her biographical novel, *Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile*, about the playwright



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I was a fan of Andrea Dunbar as a teenager and watched *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in my early teens. I had a black-and-white TV in my room with a coat-hanger aerial, and when my parents went to bed, I would watch all sorts of inappropriate films on Channel 4. I loved Andrea's writing, and Shelagh Delaney's, so I wanted to be a playwright. Their writing spoke to me about my own life experiences; I felt a connection.

I was interested in writers such as Gordon Burn and David Peace. They were inspired by 20th-century American non-fiction novelists, but set their work in northern England. It's important to treat your

'characters' with respect. Richard Holmes describes the process of biographical writing as "making the dead walk again". If you exhume somebody, you have to tread carefully.

Andrea's story is not the historical truth – partly because nobody knows what the truth really was. So much of the factual material around her life was uncertain. She dramatised her own life for the stage. But just as she told her life story through drama, I thought it might be possible to tell it through fiction.

Freedom Studios approached me initially [about a stage adaptation]. I thought they would

do something interesting, as they were based in Bradford and wanted to cast the play locally. It toured around working men's clubs, pubs, community centres and theatres across Yorkshire in 2019. It really connected with people across the region; many had never set foot in a theatre before, but were delighted to see a play in their local drinking hole. I thought Andrea would have appreciated that. Lisa Holdsworth [who adapted *Black Teeth...* for the stage] made me look at the book in a new way. She took the dialogue and essence of the novel and restructured it. It invigorated my perception of the work.

The last time I was at the Royal Court, the audience was predominantly middle class, and probably a few tiers above on the social scale. So in that respect, not much has changed since Andrea's plays were first performed there. It's probably quite different UK-wide, although even with subsidies, it's still beyond the reach of many.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too is loved by audiences from all backgrounds, Andrea's humour cuts through boundaries. The play is distinctively northern, and I think there's an appetite for our particular bleak black wit. I'm pleased *Black Teeth...* will be performed in Bristol. There has been a lot of interest in the play since it was first performed, so I hope this is just the beginning.

Fran Lewis directs *Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile* at Kelvin Players Theatre, Bristol, July 9-13. nfd.io/blkteeth