



THE FLOATING THEATRE COMPANY

Meet the actors touring Britain's countryside in a narrowboat, proving that all the world really is a stage

Words: Norman Miller Photos: Sean Malyon

The sudden appearance of a heron perched by a weir isn't a distraction most actors get as they prepare to go on stage. This stage, though, has just been set up by one of Britain's most distinctive theatre companies beside Sonning Lock.

The Thames drifts lazily through this rural spot, described by Jerome K Jerome in his classic *Three Men In A Boat* as "the most fairy-like little nook on the whole river".

But rather than fairytales, I'm here to see Britain's longest-standing rural touring company deliver its latest show, *Revoltin' Women*, a wittily conceived two-hour slice of musical theatre chronicling the suffragettes' votes-for-women battle. It is punctuated by the hoot of unseen owls in the dark riverside woods, plus the rather comic thud of apples dropping off a tree amid the audience.

This is the world of Mikron, which has spent nearly 50 years bringing innovative theatre to a startling array of venues, from allotments and boatyards to orchards and tunnels. Its 2015 production *One of Each* toured

fish and chip shops – with fish suppers as interval nosh. Over the decades, Mikron has written 60 shows featuring 360 songs and performed to nearly 400,000 punters. Its annual tours fan out from its base at Marsden in Yorkshire's Colne Valley, with the company travelling by canal boat in spring and summer, and a van adding extra dates in autumn.

Mikron's way of doing things has created a powerful bond with

“Venues include allotments, boatyards, orchards and tunnels”

audiences. “We have so much support all over the country,” says company producer Pete Toon. When the company hit a financial crisis in 2012, supporters raised £40,000 – including an anonymous bequest of £10,000 that came with a simple note: “Thank you for a wonderful evening at the campsite in Grimley”.

“Mikron is bigger than all of us,” explains artistic director Marianne McNamara. “We are mere custodians

of a wonderful tradition.” That tradition stretches back to the 1963 Edinburgh Festival when actors Mike Lucas, Sarah Cameron and Ron Legge founded the company by blending the Mike and ‘Ron’ bits of their names – though mikron being Greek for ‘small’ added a classical flourish.

But what most defines Mikron is the company's 1975 brainwave of turning a 70-foot-long 1936 Grand Union former cargo boat into a unique

‘floating theatre’ to take its shows to out-of-the-way spots. Rather than audiences travelling to a formal urban theatre space, the actors come to the places where the audiences live, work and play.

And rural venues are a perfect forum for powerful theatre. Forget *The Archers*. History shows revolutionary zeal woven into the fabric of the British countryside, from the Peasants' Revolt to the Levellers, the Tolpuddle Martyrs to the Grain Riots. “Mikron tells the story of movements or moments in British history,” says Marianne. “Particularly the ordinary people behind big events.” So alongside its suffragette saga, Mikron's 2018

1 The Mikron theatre actors provide al fresco entertainment by the Thames with their take on the suffragette story 2 Actor James McLean takes donations in exchange for tickets 3 The company barge is home and transport in one 4 Mikron's troupe stops at around 130 venues in a season



5 Actors take on multiple roles and provide the music, too 6 After 50 years on the circuit, a Mikron performance always pulls in a crowd 7 The company lives on 'Tyseley' 8 James and Marianne in the kitchen 9 The crew from left: Christopher Arkeston; Marianne; Daisy Ann Fletcher; Rosamund and James

about the area,” says Rosamund. There are quirky local characters aplenty, and the cast reels off examples, from a legendary canalside pub landlord to a regular who comes to see the show three times from different viewpoints, with the explanation: “I like it from the left, I like it from the right, and I like it full-frontal.” My comment that this sounds like a line from a *Carry On* film draws the revelation that founder Mike Lucas had appeared “underneath Barbara Windsor” in *Carry On Camping*. Other Mikron alumni include *Harry Potter* star Mark Williams (Arthur Weasley) and Buffy Davis (Jolene Archer in the eponymous radio series).

Though Mikron already plays a dazzling array of venues, I ask how they respond to requests to venture to new, off-the-beaten-track spots. “I will do my best,” says Marianne simply. “We always look at areas where people may not have had any theatre before.”

One recent request came from Maryport on the Solway Firth in Cumbria. “So we went up there, and even though we averaged maybe £2 per head in the collection [Mikron asks for donations at the end of a performance]

we had a community hall full of people who hadn’t ever seen theatre before,” says Marianne proudly.

James picks up the thread: “You’re driving along a single-track road with passing places, and you think ‘Yes, this is Mikron territory.’” Then off he goes to get ready to star beneath the stars.

Norman Miller is an award-winning writer covering diverse subjects for a wide range of titles. He particularly loves interesting British stories to do with travel, food and drink, and heritage.

Turn over to discover more touring rural theatre companies... ➤

season featured a play about the NHS, *Get Well Soon*, featuring superbugs, bed-blocking and the plight of A&Es. Other rural touring companies such as Pentabus (see page 58) have premiered plays such as Simon Longman’s *Milked* examining rural unemployment; Sian Owen’s *This Land*, probing the impact of fracking on rural communities; and Alecky Blythe’s pioneering *Strawberry Fields*, which put a spotlight on immigrant fruit pickers.

BRING ON THE FUN

But if that suggests evenings of po-faced politicking, far from it. Mikron uses clever songs and rumbustious production to engage audiences in a way that goes back to an early masterpiece of rural touring theatre, John McGrath’s *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, which theatre group 7:84 took around the Scottish Highlands and islands in 1973.

There’s also the joy of unexpected distractions, such as that heron or those plopping apples. Recent Mikron performances have been augmented by a raucous party boat whooping by during a particularly moving scene in *Get Well Soon*, while trains and public address systems provided additional sound effects to a show beside a Nottinghamshire rail track. “But a lot of people come for those moments,” says actor James McLean.

“And it all adds to the unique collective experience,” adds actor

Rosamund Hine, as does the contrast between venues – a riverside pub one day, a community allotment the next. Performing outdoors adds a special magic too, says James. “It’s really lovely doing a show and being captivated by a sunset silhouetting the boat against trees, or hearing sheep in the distance.”

While performing in such settings sounds idyllic, how do they find living together on a narrowboat, slowly

“People at our shows are proud of where they’re from and want to tell you about the area”

chugging around 130 or so venues each season? “We do spend a lot of time together,” admits Rosamund. “We cook together, sleep above each other, get dressed together. But we’re very in tune with each other.” Marianne adds that each season’s troupe is chosen as much for the actors’ suitability for life on the boat as their performance on stage, with diva tendencies or anti-social traits quietly scouted for during auditions.

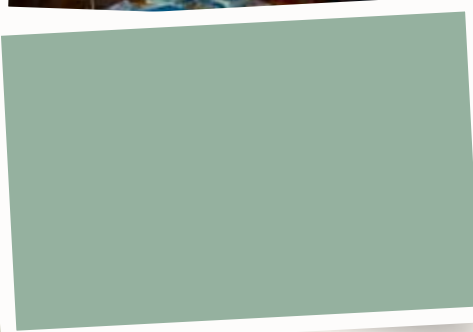
AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

There’s an intimacy with audiences too. “People at our shows are proud of where they’re from and want to tell you



THESPIANS ON TOUR

Mikron is one of many small companies bringing performance to the countryside. Here are some more to look out for in a field or barn near you...



PENTABUS Midlands

Founded in 1974 from two old barns on a Shropshire farm, this renowned company tours rural-themed productions around the Midlands. Its roster of over 150 new plays includes *Underland* performed 100m below ground at Clearwell Caves. pentabus.co.uk

CARN TO COVE Cornwall

A major winner at 2017's inaugural Rural Touring Awards, Carn To Cove brings performing arts to rural communities around Cornwall, playing in chapels and community halls. The company also has a film arm, C Fylm. carntocove.co.uk

FIELD THEATRE GROUP The Fens

This group was founded in 2004 to deliver arts, cultural and heritage projects across the Fenlands. 2018 saw the inaugural Fenland Film Festival, while the play *Holding Hands* explored the themes of dementia and disintegrating landscape. fieldtheatregroup.btck.co.uk

MED THEATRE Devon

Formed in 1989, this Dartmoor-based company combines modern traditions of theatre and performance with local material to create drama, dance, music and film alongside young people's projects and sessions in schools. medtheatre.co.uk

THEATRE ORCHARD Somerset

Theatre Orchard uses "peculiar places" in Somerset as its stage, including historic houses, community orchards, woodland glades and in 2018, Clevedon Pier. Themes of recent productions include the loss of rural pubs in *Horses! Horses!* theatreorchard.org.uk

NEW PERSPECTIVES East Midlands

New Perspectives is an East Midlands touring company formed in 1973 to create rural-themed dramas - and introduce audiences to international work, such as 2018's *The Fishermen*, adapted from the book by Chigozie Obioma. newperspectives.co.uk

INN CROWD Southeast England

Supporting rural pubs in Southeast England with spoken-word live performances, Inn Crowd aims to help landlords attract new customers and widen the experience for regulars, while reinforcing pubs as a central part of rural communities. inncrowd.org.uk

FOREST FORGE Hampshire

For over 35 years, Forest Forge has provided a cultural hub in the New Forest, touring its own shows across the region as well as creating projects with local community groups and schools. forestforgetheatre.co.uk

HIGHLIGHTS North Pennines

Cumbrian company Highlights was set up in 1997 to take theatre, dance and music to isolated communities in the North Pennines, an area that has suffered economic decline. Now covering rural areas of Cumbria, County Durham and Northumberland, it has toured over 160 productions. highlightsnorth.co.uk

FINE CHISEL West Country

This Bristol-based company - affiliated to the Theatre Royal, Bath - tours music-infused productions around the West Country, with occasional forays further afield. They've performed at farms and railway arches as well as in soggy fields. finechisel.co.uk

THE FLANAGAN COLLECTIVE North Yorkshire

"We spend a lot of time taking stories to unusual places," says Alex Wright of this North Yorkshire-based company, founded in 2011. Past venues have included a brewery on the shores of Loch Lomond and a 400-year-old pub on the North York Moors. theflanagancollective.com

NORTH EAST ARTS TOURING Highlands

NEAT brings professional theatre and dance to rural communities across the North East of Scotland, working from a converted barn in Burn O' Bennie. neatshows.co.uk