

West inn shows

Steve Wright looks forward to another piping-hot season of new plays from Theatre West.

Every year since 2003, Theatre West – who've championed new writing since 1990 – have produced an autumn season at the Alma Tavern. This annual smorgasbord of new writing has become a bolted-down highlight of Venue's theatrical year, for the excitement of seeing the freshest new writing staged in the Alma's intimate black-box space.

This year, the season is in place as usual – but the manner of its creation has been different. Instead of inviting scripts from all comers, Theatre West – aka co-founders Ann Stiddard and Alison Comley – invited 50 of their favourite local playwrights to write a piece inspired by a photograph, randomly assigned.

It all started last winter, when Alison was in Berlin. At a city market, she found a stall heaving with old photographs, all of unknown origins. "It was fascinating looking through and wondering, 'who are these people, what were these stories?'" Alison recalls. The idea came to her that these images could form the stimuli for the next season's plays. "I spent a cold hour on the

pavement choosing photos – I thought we'd need a good mix, of landscapes and scenes as well as faces."

The next stage was to invite 50 selected writers to come to the Alma one winter evening, and select a picture (all hidden in envelopes, so no peeking) as their jumping-off point. Then came a weekend in May, for which the writers each sent in 10 pages of script, with all 50 excerpts performed script-in-hand in front of Alison, Ann, a panel of judges and members of the public. Audiences and panels voted on which scripts they liked. Alison: "It was a good way of doing it. Knowing that we couldn't possibly stage all 50 scripts, it was a way to involve lots of writers without committing everyone to all the energy and investment of writing a full script."

Nine of these 50 excerpts were selected, and the writers asked to convert them into full-length scripts, with support from dramaturgs. Then came another couple of days deciding which five would make it to full production. The other four plays will get rehearsed readings at the start of the season. "It's been interesting to see how writers have responded to their photos," Ann reflects. "Some have taken a literal approach, where you can see exactly where in the image the story has come from: others have been more oblique."

The final five include (and the season kicks off with) **'The Darkroom'** (4-15 Oct) by Steve Lambert, whose brilliant 'Showing the Monster' was part of Theatre West's 2009 season. Inspired by an image of a post-war garden party featuring some slightly enforced jollity, Steve's play is set shortly after World War II, and features

a couple – he was a code-breaker during the war, and then suffered a nervous breakdown – living a blameless existence in their country cottage. When a friend visits from London, however, the trio find a box in the air-raid shelter – and its contents are the cue for secrets about our hero's past to come tumbling out. Elsewhere, Penny Gunter's **'Dorian's Second Life'** (18-29 Oct) is a highly physical, one-man show about a man whose obsession with a certain high-adrenaline sport has had dramatic effects upon his family life. **'Raising Kamila'** (1-12 Nov), by local poet/playwright Edson Burton, is set on a tugboat on the Rhine, peopled by boat-owner Oskar and his travelling companion Kamila. When Lukas, an artist, comes aboard, their peaceable rhythms are upset and truths are revealed. Alison: "It will mean creating a boat for the Alma, which will be a nice challenge!"

Next up is **'I Remember Green'** (15-26 Nov) by Southwest Scriptwriters member Heather Lister. Ann: "This one explores the relationship between parents and their son who was blinded as a result of a fall, for which the father feels responsible. The writing is very lyrical and poetic." The excellent Andy Burden

directs this one (he's joined, in a talented directing pool, by Pamela Benham, Sita Calvert-Ennals, Amanda Horlock and Ed Viney). The season's last play is **'Sitting with Thistle'** (29 Nov-10 Dec) by Bristol University student Marietta Kirkbride, which centres on two siblings staying at their grandmother's house in mid-Wales. Cue a black comedy that unearths the deep-seated relationship issues between the two.

A fine season, in short. All good, meanwhile, on planet Theatre West? "We're in good health," Ann beams. "We got Arts Council funding this year for the whole season, at the first time of asking, and we are one of the very few companies actually producing new writing in Bristol... We are giving writers a platform early in their career." And giving Bristol audiences quality, thought-provoking new writing, year after year.

THE **THEATRE WEST** SEASON AT THE ALMA TAVERN, BRISTOL BEGINS WITH **THE DARKROOM** (4-15 OCT). FFI: WWW.ALMATAVERNTHEATRE.CO.UK AND WWW.THEATRE-WEST.CO.UK FOR A LONGER VERSION OF THIS FEATURE, SEE WWW.VENUE.CO.UK



What's in a picture? Two of the photographs used as stimulus for the scriptwriters of Theatre West's 2011 season (*The Darkroom*' is below, *Raising Kamila*' above)



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**ANN STIDDARD,
THEATRE WEST**