

'TWO PINTS OF LAGER AND A TICKET UPSTAIRS PLEASE'

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Ann Stiddard and Alison Comley, climb up the creaking side stairs of the Alma Tavern, Clifton and, at the top, they step inside another world - their black-walled, 53-seat theatre.



Theatre West's Ann Stiddard and Alison Comley on the set of RoughHouse Theatre's Twelfth Night

Ann and Alison are the joint artistic directors of Theatre West, a venture they launched 10 years ago. This Bristol theatre-in-a-pub is, says Ann, "their baby". Then, like any proud parents, they start to check everything's ok with it.

This involves looking at everything from the seating, the bank of lights and the recent stage layout of the stage.

From their little "baby", about 30 world premieres have emerged as well as masses of adventurous new writing. The pair are passionate about every aspect of it.

This month, for example, there's a UK premiere of Fragile Theatre Partnership's, Fat Shirley's - A Trailer Park Opera. That's followed by its production of The Devil And Mr Johnson, exploring the life and turbulent times of Delta blues legend, Robert Johnson.

This is one little theatre that's certainly big on experimentation.

For the production of Roughhouse Theatre's Twelfth Night, the stage backdrop is clad in deep scarlet. On the wooden floor sits a curvy cello, part-balanced on a ladderback chair for a Cabaret-esque retelling of Shakespeare's classic comedy, set in decadent 1930s' Berlin.

The nearby actors' changing room must be a battleground for the company's 11-strong cast. It's about the size of an enlarged cupboard.

There's a tiny separate loo, outside which actors costumes hang neatly. A step away are piles of acting paraphernalia - costume jewellery, hats, make-up and two halves of a coconut strewn in front of the smudged, wall-length mirror.

Lastly, a teetering row of empty booze bottles stand along the frosted windowsill. You can easily imagine the frenetic chaos.

A decade ago, this was just part of a neglected function room and, back then, Alison and Ann were putting their plays on at the Showboat pub, in Gloucester Road.

The pair worked wonders persuading the Alma Tavern's previous owners to transform the redundant space into a tiny theatre and they are delighted the pub's present proprietors are happy to back them, too.

The Alma Tavern Theatre began at a slow burn with just two or three productions a year. But now there's a feast of drama on almost year-round.

With audiences boosted by the temporary closure of the Old Vic, hungry culture vultures are flocking to the Alma Tavern because they can pick up dinner downstairs, followed by drama up upstairs.

"Our aim is to sustain quality drama, along with comedy, bold new writing and world premieres" Ann explains.

"Writers who've made a name for themselves here, have successfully gone on to other theatres and television."

Alison muses: "One day someone who has acted here might get an Oscar."

And while they both laugh, it could easily come true. The pair set up a Search For A Script challenge and were inundated by new writers keen to see their words leap off the page and on to stage. But an Arts Council cash squeeze means there have been cuts to showing new works.

The pair set up Theatre West 16 years ago and now organise 10 weeks of production at the Alma Tavern throughout the autumn season, leaving other companies to fill the gaps during the rest of the year.

Their seamless conversations and laughter testify to their 20-year long friendship and they are both passionate about seeking out new writing.

When they aren't at the Alma or working, they love nothing more than taking their theatre company to Latvia and, so far, they've been on three tours.

Ann explains: "We were invited to a festival over there because there's a big Latvian community in Bristol and although there was a distinct language problem, we by-passed that by putting on a visual play about the World Cup. Mind you, their English - even in tiny villages - is fine.

"We did tackle some Latvian words, which actually produced the most laughs with the audience because we pronounced them so badly."

I ask if they work in the theatre full-time, but their answer is "no". Alison explains: "This is done for love. I work for Bristol City Council and Ann's a self-employed graphic designer.

"The Alma Tavern Theatre's a great place for new theatre companies. This is a unique pub theatre and we're very proud of it."

And so they should be, now their baby has grown into a 10-year-old.

- The Alma Tavern and Theatre 18-20 Alma Vale Road, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 2HY. For tickets, go to the website at: www.almataverntheatre.co.uk or call 0117 946 7899