

Fringe, with knobs on

Next week a new species of London theatre opens in a blaze of motorised bats. **Stanley Reynolds** meets the men behind the venture.

Everyone remembers that opening: "And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: 'Holy Jesus! What are these goddamned animals?'"

That, of course, is Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, subtitled *A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* which first appeared under the weird pen-name of Raoul Duke in issue 95 of *Rolling Stone* on November 11, 1971 and took the "new journalism" one giant step further from anything that even Tom Wolfe, father of the "n.j." had ever imagined.

Hunter Thompson, grandly styled national affairs correspondent of *Rolling Stone*, had gone to Vegas to cover the Mint 400 motor cycle race for that straight, three-piece suit and buttoned-down mag, *Time* because he had first made his name as the all-seeing-eye-reporter with articles about those Nazis of the freeway and turnpike, the Hell's Angels motor cycle club-
Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs.

Now he was abandoning the reporter-as-a-man-taking-notes-in-the-corner and was being the reporter-stage-centre, the reporter-as-hero which is what makes everyone groan over the new journalism but in this case it was different because Hunter S. was the anti-hero absolutely bombed out on all kinds of drugs and booze.

It was weird that any one would put the stuff in a newspaper and now- weirder still- they are putting it on the stage. Mr. Lou Stein, the young American director who has such great success, especially with Eastern European plays, at the Gate Theatre, upstairs at the dusty Albert pub in Notting Hill, is using his own adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to open on Monday at London's first purpose built fringe theatre, called the Gate at the Latchmere in 503 Battersea Park Road, SW11.

It is quite an adventure because it is attempting to rather unfringe the fringe theatre. That is, take it away from the usual make-do stage and appalling seating and turn it into American style studio theatre. In a way, of course, this may mean killing the fringe, for what they are building at the Latchmere is a miniature theatre, with seats that are not only upholstered but also gradually elevated. Even the stage is raked, just like the West End, except that the theatre will only seat 100 people.

All this, of course, smells of money and there is money behind the Gate at the Latchmere. It is not Arts Council money, although they have given half the £8,000 production costs in a project grant for *Fear and Loathing*. The big money, however, comes from Dai Davies of Albion Records.

The record company has acquired the pub from the brewery and cleaned it up. Mr. Nigel Walters, who works for Albion, has become the manager of the pub and over-saw its conversion, or, rather, its reconversion to the splendid, shiny-wood, even original gas-lit Victorian pub it was long ago.

"Before we took it over," Walters said, "I spent a lot of nights down here and it was amazing, people getting sick on the floor, the cops getting called in." It was very much a rough-and-ready Battersea public house. "But," he added, "the area is changing, becoming up-and-coming. We hope to get a local audience. Besides, we did a survey of fringe theatre audiences and found that 60 per cent of them came to the King's Head or the Bush by car."

That means, he said, even if the working-class regulars of the Latchmere are put off by the trendy Victorian décor of their old pub there will still be an audience for the theatre.

Lou Stein first came to England in 1974 when he was 24. He had been a teenage theatre director in America, producing plays in hotels in those God-forsaken, lonesome parts of the American Middle-West where there are no theatres and the big hotel is the centre of a town's social life. It was, he said, very funny doing Noel Coward or musicals in hotel dining-rooms, but after a while it got rather soul-destroying and he thought he'd try to work in London, as a director, an adaptor of novels like Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* and books like *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and also stepping in to do some acting.

"The reason I decided to open the theatre with *Fear and Loathing* rather than, say, *Clifford Odets*, was that the paperback of *Fear and Loathing* has been so successful here, it's been reprinted so many times and *Ralph Steadman*, who did the drawings for it, is an Englishman, *Steadman* has done the poster for the play."

"*Steadman* told me he was keen to do the sets for the play- he has done theatrical sets before- but he is busy working with *Hunter Thompson* on a new book about Hawaii and, he said, "I was very interested to see what someone else would do with *Fear and Loathing* in Las Vegas". *Steadman* said *Thompson* would be coming over to see the play but not on the opening night. "*Hunter* told me, 'I'll burst in one night and surprise'."

Apart from figuring that he had an audience of *Hunter Thompson* fans in London, Lou Stein said that putting a wild and lumbering book like *Fear and Loathing* on the stage was such a challenge to his playwrighting skills that he couldn't resist it.

The book, he said, comes on like *Gang Busters*, which is a reference to an old cops and robbers American radio series, about to open with all sorts of loud noises, sirens, machine-gun fire and marching feet. That, he said, was the way his adaptation opened. "Anyone can write a first act," he said, "It is the second act that is hard." He reckoned he'd come on like *Gang Busters* with the second act as well. That, he said, was the book was and what was good about the book.

"It was a hard job adapting this for the stage but I think I've cracked it." What the book was really about was being a journalist. That, he said, was at the heart of it and it is what he will be trying to convey on the stage.

The night I went round to the Latchmere they were still building not only the sets- with, naturally, a replica of the Great Red Shark, the Chevrolet convertible which zoomed top-down at a hundred miles-an-hour through the goddamn screaming bats to Las Vegas but also the theatre itself. "It'll be all right on the night." Lou Stein said.

"We're going to have a restaurant upstairs as well, " *Nigel Walters* said. "And every time we have a show we're going to have food that fits in. For *Fear and Loathing* we're going to serve desert food, the sort of thing you'd eat in Texas or New Mexico or Nevada.

"What's that," a man asked, "rattlesnake?"

"Not quite," *Nigel Walters* said, "not just yet."