

Lou Stein Interview

Theatre Things

When Lou Stein became Artistic Director of Chickenshed in 2016, it was the latest move in an already long and distinguished career. As founder of Notting Hill's Gate Theatre and former Artistic Director of Watford Palace Theatre, he brings to the role a wealth of professional experience – but also a unique personal appreciation for the value of Chickenshed's work.

“My son Ethan, who is now eleven, has been a member of Chickenshed's Children's Theatre since he was seven, and it was he who brought me to Chickenshed,” explains Lou. “He has Down Syndrome and I began to see the organisation through his eyes – the eyes of a young person with ambition who doesn't want to be labelled as having a disability, and who loves theatre. When I saw the job advertised, I saw it as an opportunity to re-focus the direction of the company to re-energise its purpose.”

That purpose is to pioneer inclusive theatre practice, something Chickenshed has been doing for over 40 years, since the company was established in 1974 by its founder – and Lou's predecessor – Mary Ward. In addition to its professional theatre programme, Chickenshed also has a Children's Theatre membership programme, a Youth Theatre, an Outreach Programme, a Performances for Children division, and runs an expansive Education programme ranging from BTEC to BA courses.

“The uniqueness of Chickenshed is that all our various parts work together to embed notions of inclusion and diversion across everything we do,” says Lou. “In short, inclusive theatre is the language which propels all of our activities. The most exciting thing about Chickenshed for me is that when you walk through our doors, all labels are dropped. When I talk about it, I always love the fact that we have the most diverse performers and audiences in the UK. My biggest challenge as Artistic Director has been to harness the amazing core ethos of the company, which has been in development now for 44 years, and work with the company to make our current work relevant to the future and to our societal goals.”

Originally from New York, Lou arrived in London in 1978 with a life-long interest in European theatre and politics. That passion found an outlet the following year in a room above Notting Hill's Prince Albert pub, which would become the Gate Theatre. “The Gate reflected the then bohemian community in Notting Hill and the work there was devoted to international drama, particularly work that hadn't received an outing in the UK,” says Lou. “At that time, the chance to see innovative international work was limited and the Gate filled a very important gap. When I left to become the Artistic Director of Watford Palace, I ensured that the core of the Gate's future work was always to centre on daring, political, and innovative premieres of international drama. And that has been the bedrock of the Gate's success throughout the years. I am so proud that it has spawned so many brilliant directors, actors, designers and playwrights.”

After ten years as Artistic Director at Watford Palace, where he worked with some of the best talent in the UK – including Helen Mirren, who turned down a stint at the RSC to appear in a new version of *Madame Bovary* – Lou formed his own production company to begin creating

new work which explored collaboration between art forms, particularly contemporary music and theatre.

“I have always been proudest of work that I’ve done which has somehow broken ground or pointed to new directions in how things can be done,” he says. “Highlights come in many shapes and forms, and the projects that stand out have somehow either changed me or people around me. Certainly the raw creativity and freedom of those early years at the Gate was a huge highlight. The Gate story is a bit of a Cinderella story. With no funding in what was a very down at the heel pub, a group of outsiders came together to create work which was highly recognised very quickly.”

Another highlight for Lou is his adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which was the first production at what was then called the Gate at the Latchmere (now Theatre 503), before transferring to the Fortune Theatre in the West End. “I’ll never forget Hunter Thompson – a notoriously reclusive writer – saying that he was flying in from his home in Aspen, Colorado to see the show, and if he didn’t like it, he was going to tear the theatre apart,” he recalls. “Luckily, he loved it.”

Before coming to Chickenshed, Lou wrote, produced and directed regularly for BBC Radio 3 and 4. “After my son Ethan was born, I was commissioned to write and curate a five part programme for The Essay about how children affect the creations of their artist-fathers – *The Father Instinct*,” he explains. “In the first episode I wrote about how Ethan positively changed my work as a director and writer, and how I approach my work. His birth was the biggest highlight of my career in that what I choose to do, and how I do it, changed dramatically. Without Ethan, I wouldn’t be at Chickenshed.”



Chickenshed’s spring season recently opened with [monolog](#), featuring a timely revival of Alan Bennett’s *Her Big Chance*, the world premiere of Diane Samuels’ *This Is Me*, and six new monologues commissioned by Chickenshed from within the creative community. This will be followed in March by a new musical piece about climate change, called *Don’t Stop*

Thinking About Tomorrow, which features nearly 150 performers drawn from young members and professional creatives who are part of Chickenshed.

In April the company presents *One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest*, using a physical theatre approach and working with actors drawn from its professional staff, and a number of Chickenshed actors who will bring a special understanding of the play by drawing on their cognitive disability. "I don't know of any theatre in the country who have the courage to do a play like this with a cast as diverse, in all ways, as ours will be," says Lou.

"The professional theatre programme is the spearhead for all our activities, and by producing high quality inclusive work, all of our various strands are pulled together. My vision for Chickenshed is that it will be a confident and highly skilled professional inclusive theatre company, which clearly places itself at the centre of London theatre's consciousness, producing unmissable work – regularly partnering with similarly minded companies and institutions. It would be good if the Arts Council recognises this new direction and helps us to sustain this goal in the future."