

50 YEARS

PENTAMETERS THEATRE

Pentameters Theatre in Hampstead celebrates 50 glorious years this September. **Léonie Scott-Matthews** and **Godfrey Old** share some memorable moments with **Emmanuel Mustafa Goldstein**.



The lovely Godfrey Old and Léonie Scott-Matthews on the stage of Pentameters Theatre in Hampstead.

Léonie: I fell in love with Hampstead in 1962. I'd always looked for a place to live where I'd have a sense of identity. I walked around. I looked at the plaques, I walked on the heath and knew that Hampstead was for me.

Not the Paris Left Bank; not Greenwich Village; not Chelsea; not Vienna - No! Hampstead seemed to me to have it all.

So I conjured up a plan. I was to live and work in the same area, for myself, and in something I was passionate about. I made sure I paid my rent - the most important thing - and I'd be free for the rest of my life.

That's basically the premise on which I've spent my days.

I qualified from the Royal Acad-

West End and did some Rep and so on, but the important thing to me was Hampstead.

I lived in various bedsits - there were a lot in Hampstead at the time and the best was at 33 Hampstead Hill Gardens which I hit in 1963. It was the bedsit to end all bedsits. It was this amazing house. I've written a play about it by the way, which we'll be staging in 2019 with a nice young cast. It's called *Bedsit Girls 1963 & The Assassination of President Kennedy*.

This bedsit was everything. It was full of poets, writers and artists...

EMG. Aye, them wer't days! Hampstead was a lot more like that in the 60s and 70s wasn't it.

looked out for each other. We were lucky. We had a phone in the hall. Many didn't. But the rent was next to nothing.

We did all sorts: working in bars, nights clubs - some were professional escorts. It was a different world. It was a much safer world. You could do it.

What was so lovely about it - I always remember how it started off - the girl in the bedsit next to me was painting oils. She was waiting for some boyfriend to come over. She was always having terrible love affairs and would write all this poetry, then screw it up and throw it away.

I used to pick up her discarded pieces of paper and there'd be lines like: 'I found that mountain side of cut glass, in spat out

I thought, that's a wonderful metaphor so I got a book together with her called *Bedsit Girl*: it was incredibly successful. She'd studied art with John Lennon in Liverpool.

Anyway, she took me to the pub where I got the idea of what I was going to do. I wrote a poem called *Sometimes You Could Call It Hampstead* and it went like this:

Sometimes You Could Call It Hampstead

Angry adolescent
who refuses to be drawn into
an adult world.

Place of fantasy and the
everlasting dream.

No-one judges or condemns,
All is condoned over a drink,
and psychiatrists are
temporary Gods alongside
hash and the acid trip.
Mental houses are health
farms, bedsitters Gandhi's
home.

We learn Chinese, read
poetry, laugh at politics,
pretend the Heath is real
country, afternoon drinking
clubs the Las Vegas of
intelligentsia.

Days drift into days,
conversations confabulating.

To go to the City is like
visiting an alien planet, for all
we need is here

In the Rosslyn Arms
In Hampstead.

Wow! It's the Sixties!

The reference to learning Chinese was a reference to Sir William Empson, who'd written this groundbreaking book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

And he was temporarily barred by Henry, the landlord of the Rosslyn Arms. He actually looked after us all and made sure we didn't drink too much. He had various ways of barring people. He'd just say things like 'I shan't be seeing you for a week' or 'I shan't be seeing you for a month' or 'I think you and I had better part company,' which meant forever!

EMG: Ouch. You didn't want that one.

Godfrey: He had a white mous-



Léonie Scott-Matthews and Godfrey Old making beautiful music together.

EMG: It used to be that the landlord of a pub was very much the social focal point. And different pubs seem to prevail at different eras. In the 60s and 70s there was Henry at the Rosslyn, then Les Gotts at the Flask in the 80s then Woody at the Duke in the 90s. They'd cash cheques, act as confidante - they really were sort of local Dons.

Léonie: Yes. And if someone was barred it really was the end of their world. In Henry's case you had to be very careful. He didn't drink and nor did his wife.

By the way, the reference in the poem: 'psychiatrists are temporary Gods' was to R.D. Lang who was our absolute God at the time. We

EMG: Moving on to Pentameters. When did you open it?

Léonie: Pentameters was opened on August the 7th 1968. I wanted to open an alternative theatre and literary venue in Hampstead.

What I really wanted was the cellar of the Rosslyn Arms. What I loved in life was poetry, literature, drinking in this pub and socialising with all these people who I absolutely adored. The men were very marginalising to the women. But Henry the landlord warned me: Léonie you're going to get addicted to this place. Look at these women. Don't get like them. Careful of these men. Don't drink the draft cider. Stick to the Liebfraumilch which I'll keep behind the



*Léonie Scott-Matthews with the cast and crew of **House of Cowards** written by Dannie Abse and directed by Conrad Blakemore (2013)*

In 1967 I'd formed a poetry group called Iambic 3 and we performed at Bungie's and other folk clubs around London.

In order to get ahead as a woman I had to avoid all that man-woman stuff. I avoided tight, clingy dresses and had a sort of uniform. hipster jeans, a denim jacket and long hair.

But North West Three had a sophistication beyond sophistication. I can't explain it. It's almost impossible to explain, but it's what I'd call the *North West Three* idiosyncrasies. I always used to say that although they had double firsts, travelled the world and had several books published, all they really wanted to do was chat to each other in the Rosslyn Arms.

So to cut a long story short, I'd worked for the Poetry Society of Great Britain, had this touring company, started editing poetry books and had managed to get *Bedsit Girl* published. Then I found the venue, which was the basement of the Freemason's Arms on Downshire Hill and we opened there on August

Heath-Stubbs and Dannie Abse and we called ourselves the Iambic Pentameters, which became just the Iambics.

Then I said, I'm going to stay here and call it Pentameters and fifty years later, here it still is.

I'm not interested in celebrity; I'm not interested in money; I'm not interested in fame; I'm interested in the higher power that is within everyone that can be expressed through art, music, poetry and theatre. And if you can tap that you can steer clear of addiction and negativity. In short, you can cut out the crap of life. Who wants celebrity? Who wants fame? Who wants money?

(Ed. call me old fashioned, I'd settle for the money!)

I like to practice what I preach: I'm not famous or rich and I live in a bedsit - well, a studio flat and I'm happy with that.

EMG: I've always said I'd rather live in a small flat in Hampstead than a huge palace anywhere else.

PENTAMETERS

presents an 8 week season of **POETRY**
with music and theatre
every Wednesd. y at 8.00 p.m.

Three Horseshoes, Heath St.,
Hampstead, N.W.3.

Starting with:
ROGER MCGOUGH } Jan. 31st.
BERNARD KOPS }
Followed by:
HAROLD PINTER } FEB. 7th.
HENRY WOOLF }

Members 25p
Guests 30p

Early Pentameters shows featured legends like Roger McCough and Harold Pinter. Not bad for 30p.

Léonie: Well, one of my favourite anecdotes was when I was talking to this guy and I said, well what do you do and he says, 'well, I sort of write a bit, you know' and, in a rather matter of fact way, I said: 'well, you can come and try something out at the theatre or whatever.' And he said, 'yeah, okay.' And he did. And it was Harold Pinter.

And he actually came and did *The Dumb Waiter* here with me, his son playing one part and Henry Woolf the other.

We've had William Empson, Stephen Spender - some truly great poets. And we started alternative comedy here long before anyone else was doing it. And we had a lot of people come and try their stuff out. We had French & Saunders and I remember auditioning Rick Mayal, Adrian Edmondson and Nigel Planer and saying 'that's some very different stuff you've got!' (*Leonie chortles to herself*).

We had a lot of people start off their careers here and some established names too Nigel Havers, Clive Swift, I could go on.

But more recently we had a crammed house for a new, unknown poetry book. Our capacity is 60 but at 106 I had to turn them away. Now isn't that interesting