

THEATRE

Proscenium extends its theatrical reach

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Rehearsing at Harrow Arts Centre in Hatch End and performing at the Compass Theatre in Ickenham has become something of a routine for Harrow-based theatre group, Proscenium. Featuring a varied programme from Chekhov and Shakespeare to Ayckbourn and Alan Bennett, the company is keen to appeal to a broad spectrum of audiences.

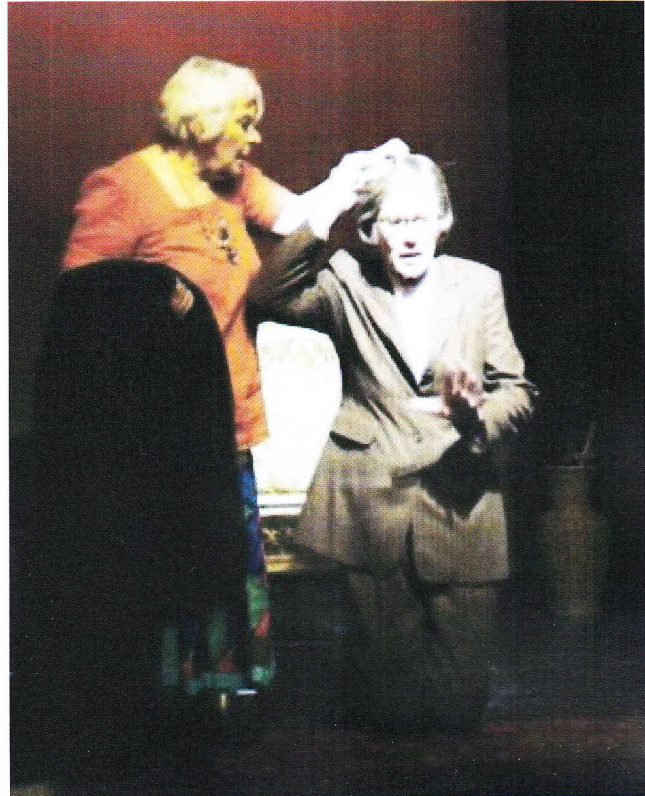
Mark Sutherland, who directs the company's latest production of Peter Shaffer's comedy *Lettice and Lovage*, is just coming to end of his three-year tenure as the group's artistic director. Mark says he has been a member of Proscenium for 30 years.

"I started as a teenager when I was at Salvatorian in Wealdstone. Now my children and wife are part of the group as well. They have walk on parts in this play."

Mark chose *Lettice and Lovage* because there are strong parts for women and the plays lend themselves to the company's set-up of producing plays using minimalist sets.

"It has two very good parts for women, which is always quite important to us as many plays tend to have a heavy emphasis on men. Both are excellent parts and it's an interesting piece moving from a Tudor hall to an office in London and a basement flat in Earls Court. In the West End Maggie Smith was in the cast and they had great sets but our audience is used to the fact they have to imagine things."

The play concerns the fortunes of Lettice Douffet, the daughter of an actress who toured France with an all-female company, playing



Susi Thornton (*Lettice Douffet*) left, and right - Evelyn Moutrie (*Lotte Schoen*) in *Lettice and Lovage*



only Shakespeare's history plays. Having inherited both her mother's theatricality and eccentricity, Lettice finds employment as a tourist guide in a down-at-heel stately home. Attempting to enliven its dull history with some over-imaginative fantasies, she is caught in the act by Lotte, a stern and sensible Preservation Trust official, and it seems her days as an entertainer are over. But the two have more in common than they first realise.

"It's a pretty big challenge for the leads, but they're rising to it very well," says Mark. "They dominate most of the play. With a small cast you can't get away with throwing people on stage to distract from a pared down set so it's very much a team effort on and off-stage."

Mark has overseen 12 productions during his time as artistic director but says he is happy to pass on responsibility to his successor Michael Gerrard.

"We change roles every three years which works well as most of us are working and squeeze in performances around our day jobs. A number of the group travel for work so it's a big commitment and it's difficult to find directors."

So what has Mark most enjoyed from his time?

"Lady in the Van was one of the most successful in terms of audience levels and Anthony and Cleopatra went down very well. Waiting For Godot was done very simply and as with this one there's a lot of pressure falls on a small group of people.

"Peter Shaffer has a way of conveying what can seem quite dry in conversation. It's not done in an overt way; you don't know the details at first, but gradually it starts coming through. It's not a plot that bangs you over the head, that's the skill of his writing. It's believable conversation that doesn't sound like telling a story but it is."

Lettice and Lovage runs until Saturday June 19 at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham. Performances at 7.45pm. Details: 07970 916 358 (Proscenium) or 01895 673 200(Compass)

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