

# arts

## Ladder logic

**Richard Smirke** hears how theatre can tackle big issues but still be entertaining

Formed in London in 1968 and based in Leeds since the mid-1970s, Red Ladder theatre company has a long and illustrious history of producing thought-provoking, radical and sometimes controversial work with a strong social conscience. Recently, the organisation has aimed mainly at youth audiences but, following the appointment of new artistic director Rod Dixon in 2006, the company has expanded its remit to actively engage adults alongside the teenage market.

"I've tried to put the politics back into the work without it being flag waving, card carrying, screaming politics," says an infectious and passionate Dixon. "I would like people to recognise that, yeah, our work is trying to engage 16 to 19 year olds but the work is great and it's entertaining. It's not a bad thing for somebody over 25 to go and see one of our plays and they shouldn't feel uncomfortable sitting in an audience amongst teenagers. It should ideally bring the two together."

A perfect example of Red Ladder's new all-inclusive ethos is *Forgotten Things*, a biting and poignant drama by Bradford-born playwright Emma Adams, which opened last year to rave notices and travels to Edinburgh Festival Fringe next month. Marking the first time since the late 1990s that Red Ladder has taken a play to the over-populated arts scrum that is Edinburgh Fringe, the decision was

based on the cross-generational appeal of the play and the quality of Adams's script, says Dixon. "Although it's a play that on the surface looks like it's targeting teenagers, audiences of all ages really access it," he explains. "It deals with the issue of teenagers committing suicide, which is quite a dark subject for a comedy but Emma has written a superb script that is quite hard hitting but also you sit there watching the play thinking: 'I'm really finding this very funny.'"

*Forgotten Things* tells the story of Toby, a lonely, misunderstood adolescent who is sent to a psychiatrist – portrayed by a 7ft high

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puppet, complete with bulging brains – only to find eventual solace in his delusional Grandma Lilly. It's a surreal, kitchen-sink fantasy, as much influenced by the dark gothic imagery of film director Tim Burton as it is by pressing social concerns such as alienation, depression and senile dementia.

"It's a play which looks at a dysfunctional family but its themes are global and it provokes interesting discussions, as theatre should do," states Dixon, who cites Red Ladder's



**Red Ladder's ethos is to raise issues and provoke debate**

actor training programme Red Grit and writing scheme Red Writers as further examples of the company's commitment to democratising live drama.

"I still believe that theatre can be an agent for social change and that's quite old fashioned but I really believe that," he continues. "I just want to lift the lid off a can of worms, tip it out and let's talk about those worms. I think opening dialogue is really important and once people are talking then that's when things happen. It's not just about marching out on the street. It's about connecting."

Key to fulfilling this philosophy are the post-show discussions that Red Ladder hosts after every performance. Engaging audience members with actors and production staff alike, the resulting debates allow theatre-goers to explore the issues thrown up by Red Ladder, be they political, racial or environmental. Dixon concedes that with theatre being a primarily middle-class interest, with a high percentage of audience members already participating in green and

social issues, there is a danger of preaching to the converted. However, his continued commitment to highlighting injustice, in all its myriad forms, along with his deep love of producing challenging, entertaining drama, is resolute.

"I think it's our duty as artists to awaken people to things," he argues. "Too often I watch plays these days that are trying to compete with TV or are trying to build film sets and, yeah, they're clever but I ask myself: 'What's the point of that?' Traditional theatre is about being in the same room as the actors, breathing the same air, watching the sweat on their faces and having a live experience with the people sitting amongst you. Then when the lights come up, you talk about it. It's been going on for hundreds of years and it's absolutely brilliant. It's the way things happen, I think. It's what Shakespeare was trying to do and it's what Red Ladder is trying to do."

*Forgotten Things is at the Pleasance King Dome, Edinburgh, August 5-31. A UK tour follows in autumn.*

