

THEATRE PREVIEW

Teechers

Adam Smith Theatre
Kirkcaldy
June 17 - 18

by Jennifer McLaren

WE CAN all remember what it was like to go to school – and some readers may still be there – so a new production of renowned playwright John Godber's *Teechers* might strike a few chords when it arrives in Fife next week.

Performed by Berkshire-based company Blackeyed Theatre and directed by Adrian McDougall, a cast of three brings the story of *Teechers* to the Kirkcaldy stage.

Fast-moving, inventive and funny, the play is Godber's witty take on life at a modern comprehensive school and through their hilarious end-of-term play, three year 11 students sketch out the new drama teacher's progress through two terms of unruly classes, cynical colleagues and obstructive caretakers.

Not without its more serious moments, the "play within a play" is performed against the backstory that drama teacher Mr Nixon has succeeded in inspiring the young students but is about to leave them behind for the safer waters of a private school – such are the rigours of the state school system.

Through pupils Salty (Donna Preston) Gail (Nicole Black) and Hobby (Jacob Addley), Godber demonstrates how young people can quickly be categorised in terms of ability, intelligence and potential and, once this has happened, the education system makes it harder for them to escape a label or stigma.

Mr Nixon believes in his pupils' potential to express themselves through drama and subscribes to the belief that all children should be treated equally, which makes it all the more tragic that he is about to depart.

Nicole Black, 22, who plays the role of Gail, is from Potters Bar in Hertfordshire. She recently completed her training at the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts (ALRA) and has since worked with organisations such as The Royal Shakespeare Company. She has been on tour with *Teechers* for three months.

She says audiences generally believe the cast members are aged between 17 and 18 when they actually range from 22 to 26.

"What we have done is brought it up to date," says Nicole. "It was originally set in 1984 and so within the play there are references to music – so we've got Gangnam Style and Justin Bieber in there – and the language is also slightly different. *Teechers* was originally set in the north of England but we have modernised it in the south, so we have got Cockney accents.

"The students put on a play about their time at the secondary school, specifically for the new drama teacher who is leaving to go to the post school. He has inspired them through drama when they weren't inspired through other lessons.

"We have had such a great response from the tour so far that John Godber has said he will be coming to one of our shows – but he hasn't said which one! We always joke with each other saying 'he's in tonight'."

John Godber was the son of a miner in Upton, West Yorkshire. He trained as a



Hobby (Jacob Addley) and Gail (Nicole Black). Picture: Savannah Photographic

teacher in drama at Breton Hall College and while head of drama at Minsthorpe High School – the school he attended as a student – he won every major award at the National Student Drama Festival between 1981 and 1983.

He went on to become a prolific and successful playwright with work performed across the world and numerous awards to his name.

Teechers was written in 1984 and published in 1985. It was first performed by the Hull Truck Theatre Company at the 1987 Edinburgh Festival.

Godber, who is renowned for his succinct and witty dialogue, has also worked extensively in television, having written for soaps such as *Brookside* and *Grange Hill*.

Nicole continues: "The production is completely stripped back in that there is minimal set and costume and three actors who play multiple parts.

"It relies on us physically and vocally to change character within an instant and the audience have to use their imagination. Between the three of us we play over 20 characters so it is a challenge."

Despite the changes in society and technology, Nicole agrees the experi-

ence of school seems to be cyclical and therefore the politics of *Teechers* continues to be relevant.

"It's about the fact that students have the right to a good education whether you go to a comprehensive school or a 'posh' school. Teachers want to go to the private schools because that's where the best kids are and all the facilities."

"It's really sad at the end because the teacher goes off the private school and they don't want him to leave.

"I think in every school, if you are taught by a great teacher and they are such an inspiration that you go on and succeed in whatever you're passionate about it is really nice. I had a drama teacher who was just like Mr Nixon – though female – and that's why I have carried on with it."

Feedback comes in a number of forms these days, with younger theatre-goers Tweeting about their experience as soon as they leave the auditorium.

Nicole adds: "After the show people sometimes come up to us – mostly teachers – who say: 'Oh my gosh, that has happened to me!' People can really relate to it."

● www.blackeyedtheatre.co.uk

ORCHESTRA PREVIEW

Dundee Symphony Orchestra

St Paul's Cathedral, Dundee
June 15

by Garry Fraser

TO PLAY or not to play – that was the question facing French horn player Andy Evans with regard to tomorrow's concert by the Dundee Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra have included in their programme, along with Beethoven's 7th Symphony and the first Strauss horn concerto, Andy's own composition *The Joy of Small Things*.

However, Andy reckons he will be in his usual place in the orchestra's horn section: "I will be playing, but I'll have to be careful to concentrate on playing and not just listening. It would be embarrassing to come in at the wrong point in your own composition!"

Andy was inspired to write the work after he moved into a house in rural Perthshire. The snow still covered the ground but within a month the garden had exploded into life. "There were warblers in the garden, buzzards overhead and wonderful dramatic skies," he says. "This inspired me to write of the joy of all the small things I experienced that spring. Composing never comes easily, but once I come up with the themes, integrating and transforming them is a real intellectual challenge."

This not the first time Andy will have had this composition played, as the work was premiered by the Highland Chamber Orchestra in 2012 and performed by a chamber orchestra in Leicestershire earlier this year. However, Saturday's performance will be the first by a symphony orchestra.

"My first composition was called *Elegy* and was a short orchestral piece I wrote after the death of my father in 1999," Andy continues. "To my surprise, after a play-through by the Nottingham Symphony Orchestra, they programmed the work. After that, friends began to ask me to write for them or their

groups and I have composed ever since."

He is currently working on a string quartet for his identical twin Simon, who plays in a regular quartet in Inverness and on the Black Isle.

Andy leads a hectic life combining his job as Professor of Breast Imaging at Ninewells Hospital with playing and composing. He started his musical career in the row in front of the horn section, as a clarinettist, but started the playing the horn in his twenties when he was a junior doctor in Stafford. "The world had too many clarinettists and I had always loved the horn, particularly in the late romantic works of Mahler and Bruckner," he says.

Every composer hopes that the interpretation of the conductor meets his own, but Andy has no qualms about DSO maestro Robert Dick. "Robert always prepares very well and knows his scores backwards. Very reassuring for any composer. Being able to chat to him during rehearsals about balance and phrasing has been very useful and we seem to be on the same wavelength."

Robert reciprocates his sentiments. "We are very lucky to have Andy in the orchestra as he is a superb horn player. His talent as a composer is an added extra. When he offered *The Joy of Small Things*, we jumped at the chance as it is an immensely approachable work."

● Dundee Symphony Orchestra play *The Joy of Small Things* – Evans; Horn Concerto no 1 – Richard Strauss (soloist Christopher Gough) and Symphony no 7 – Beethoven.

● Concert begins at 7.30pm. Tickets £10, £9 and £5 available from Central Box Office, City Square (01382 434940) or at the door.



DSO in rehearsal this week. Picture: Steve MacDougall