

PUB THEATRE OF THE MONTH PENTAMETERS

'The true meaning of the word Bohemian'



Interview with Artistic Director Léonie Scott-Matthews

by Heather Jeffery

Having interviewed many Artistic Directors, from newcomers to seasoned theatre professionals, I was excited to meet the person behind the longest running pub theatre.

As I stood in the foyer to the Theatre and peered at theatrical posters and images on the walls, I could hear actors rehearsing, with their beautifully modulated voices filling the space. Imagine my surprise to walk in and find one of the voices was Léonie Scott-Matthews herself, surrounded by a



Léonie Scott-Matthews,
the muse

suitably lavish stage set. After greeting each other my eyes wandered around the 60-seat auditorium clocking the opulent oddly matched comfy cosy colourful seats. I lovingly pictured myself sharing the front row sofa with long haired Bohemian types.

An image that was soon dispelled as I learnt the true meaning of the word 'Bohemian'.

In 2018, Léonie will have been running the Theatre for 50 years. Next year, along with her partner Godfrey Old, they will be rolling out the carpet for 12 months of celebrations. Past performers at the Theatre will be appearing, and, as Léonie put it: ["The world has changed, life has changed, we'll be remembering some of the people who were in my peer group; an evening remembering them"](#).

With a little prompt Léonie treats me to the wonderful story of her life in the Theatre.

["My father was a musician but he had to work in banking. His view was 'work is hell, but leisure is pleasure'"](#) begins Léonie. ["I felt that, personally, if I could live and work for myself in the same area and at something I was passionate about and as long as I paid my rent, I would be free."](#)

Trained as an actress at the Royal Academy of Music and Drama, where she obtained the RAM Diploma and L.R.A.M. (Speech and Drama) and, being particularly interested in poetry, she won the Poetry Society's Gold Medal for Verse Speaking. Léonie was also attracted to being a Theatre Director.

["The idea came to me to start a Pub Fringe Theatre based on poetry and literature, rather than continuing as a working actress."](#) Léonie's life took a new direction when she discovered the Rosslyn Arms in Hampstead during the 60s.

["It was full of writers and poets and had an interesting ambience"](#) says Léonie. ["It was a man's world. They'd get together to drink and there was little room for women"](#). Nevertheless, Léonie started to go there on a regular basis. ["Grew my hair long, wore a torn denim shirt, hipster jeans and sandals. The landlord said to me, 'If you're going to get addicted to this place, don't drink](#)

Pentameters Theatre
28 Heath Street
Entrance Oriel Place
Hampstead
London NW3 6TE

Website

OVERVIEW

Founded by Léonie Scott-Matthews on 7 August 1968, Pentameters is one of the most respected fringe theatres in London. It has the perfect location in the heart of Hampstead which is well-known for its creative character and thriving community of artists.

THE PRODUCTIONS

Eclectic tastes from Shakespeare, classic revivals and new plays to alternative comedy, music and poetry events. Pentameters has 8 to 12 full runs a year, as well shorter runs. They also have a regular Sunday session, 'Moon at Night', an evening of poetry, music, theatre and open mic.

VALUE ADDED

The comfy seating, arty décor and general ambiance of the space is well worth experiencing for yourself. The Theatre has a separate entrance to the pub, but you can take your drinks upstairs, just as you would expect from a pub theatre.

the draft cider, stick to Liebfraumilch and be wary of these men”.

Léonie had moved from Nottingham to Hampstead in a period when it was possible to “rent a bedsit for a few quid”. Her ambitions moved towards finding a venue but she didn’t know how to convince the establishment to help her to get started when her ideas were so alternative. While being introduced to poets and musicians, working for the Poetry Society, Norman Hidden’s Workshop Two, and editing Poetry Books, she joined a band. Calling themselves ‘The Iambic Three’ they performed music and poetry in folk clubs and art venues.

In 1968 she found the perfect venue in Hampstead. The Freemasons Arms had a function room which they thought would be suitable for her needs but Léonie preferred the old Skittle Alley in the basement. After she convinced the publican it was the perfect place for her venture he let her have it for a pound. She called it ‘Pentameters’. From that day to this, Léonie has never had a grant and has always been independent.

Léonie still has the original posters advertising Pentameters early programmes. Their first gig included two poets: John Heath-Stubbs (who went on to be awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 1973 and an OBE in 1989), and Dannie Abse (who later received numerous literary awards for his writing as well as an honorary doctorate from the University of Wales in 1989). Another poster shows that Rosemary Tonks and Edwin Brock were featured amongst many other performers and writers including Sir William Empson, Adrian Henri, Adrian Mitchell, Brian Patten, Sir Stephen Spender and Stevie Smith.

In time, the Freemasons Arms became unsuitable and so Pentameters was temporarily moved to the Haverstock Arms in Belsize Park. This period is briefly written about by Léonie in a book called Belsize Park – Belsize Park Remembered (published in Autumn 2017) with a foreword by Sir Derek Jacobi.

Léonie moved to the current venue, above the Three Horseshoes (now the Horseshoe, 28 Heath St.) in October 1971. Here the eclectic programme included poetry, music, drama, old time music hall, speakers, and jazz.

THE PUB

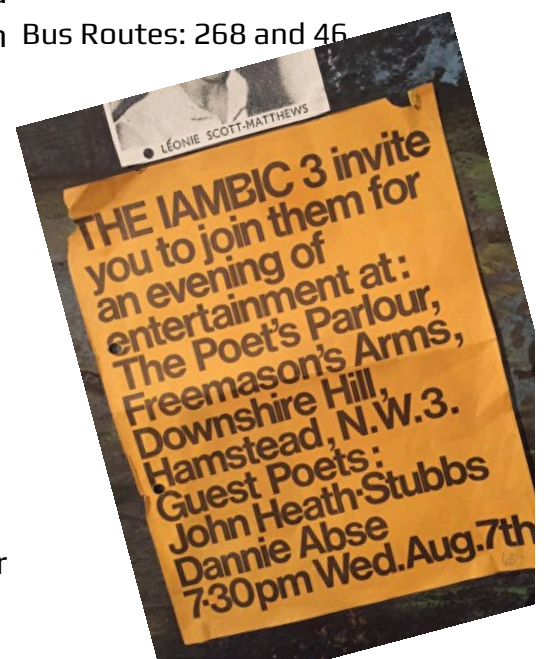
Gorgeous décor, tasty pub food using fresh seasonal produce and their own brewed beer makes THE HORSESHOE PUB as individual as the theatre upstairs. The boss, Jasper, started brewing below the pub, with the aim of making a few beers to serve in the bar. In 2010, the operation outgrew their basement and moved down the road to become Camden Town Brewery.

LOCATION

Pentameters Theatre is located above The Horseshoe Pub on the corner of Heath Street and Oriel Place. Set in vibrant Hampstead Village with its abundance of eateries, there’s no shortage of pre-and-post theatre options for foodie types. Come early to nose around the boutiques and fashionista indie shops.

Nearest tube station: Hampstead (Northern Line) – turn left out of the station and you’ll find the pub one minutes-walk with the theatre around the corner on Oriel Place.

Bus Routes: 268 and 46



Some of the performers were already household names, including Keith Johnstone and the Theatre Machine, the psychiatrist R. D. Laing and poets Sir William Empson, Sir Stephen Spender and Ted Hughes.

Léonie recalls some of the highlights. “The Dumb Waiter with Harold Pinter playing one of the parts with his son and the actor, Henry Woolf. In the 80s Arnold Brown compèred stand-up comedy on a regular basis and some of the best people for holding an audience were Ben Elton, John Hegley and the performance poet Roger McGough.”

She adds that “many of those appearing were soon snapped up by television” and she reels off the names of the most famous “Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Nigel Planer, Rick Mayall, Ade Edmondson, Alexei Sayle and Pamela Stephenson.”

New writers included Robert Calvert, who went on to become lead singer with ‘Hawkwind’ and wrote the famous song ‘Silver Machine’. Their in-house actor/musician, Patrick Bergin, went to America to star in ‘Sleeping with the Enemy’ with Julia Roberts.

“Securing tenure of the first floor at the Horseshoe has not been an easy task – but more than worth the effort”, says Léonie. “It’s near a tube station and rather than going down to the basement which was very 60s, one goes up. Originally it was a billiard room with chandeliers and built in 1890. Pentameters has a unique ambience and it’s sort of like inviting someone into your own home”.

Léonie is an extremely determined woman; she spent her life savings on Pentameters, particularly on the fire escape. “Got building permission, planning, engineering, and it passed”. Clearly, it’s her passion for the arts that gives her a unique approach. “I don’t like words like bums on seats or punters. It doesn’t matter whether it’s packed or there’s only one person, so long as it’s an unforgettable evening and you’re made to feel unique and special. A lot of people come because of that.”

To celebrate her commitment to the creative arts, Léonie was honoured as an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music and as a Hampstead resident received a Camden

DID YOU KNOW ...

Léonie Scott-Matthews founded Pentameters on 7 August, 1968 at The Freemasons Arms and moved it to the current venue above The Horseshoe Public House, 20 October, 1971.

Writers who appeared at the Theatre include:

Dannie Abse (1923-2014), Kingsley Amis, Margaret Drabble, Ted Hughes, Laurie Lee, Roger McGough, Edna O'Brien, Harold Pinter, John Wain and the psychiatrist R.D. Laing.

Performers who appeared right at the start of their careers include:

Russell Brand, Adrian Edmundson, Ben Elton, French and Saunders, Nigel Havers, Celia Imrie, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Jenny Seagrove, Pamela Stephenson and Alexei Sayle.

The many authors to perform at Pentameters include Dannie Abse (1923-2014), Kingsley Amis, Margaret Drabble, Ted Hughes, Laurie Lee, Roger McGough, Edna O'Brien, Harold Pinter, John Wain and the psychiatrist R.D. Laing. The Theatre has also played host to many performers at the start of their careers, including Russell Brand, Adrian Edmundson, Ben Elton, French and Saunders, Nigel Havers, Celia Imrie, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Jenny Seagrove, Pamela Stephenson and Alexei Sayle.

To celebrate her commitment to the creative arts, Léonie was honoured

Good Citizen Award in 1998 in recognition of her outstanding work for the community. Hampstead Village Voice awarded Pentameters 'Best Theatre, 2016' and Camden Council an 'Asset of Community Value' award.

Léonie is such a lovely host and did not forget to acknowledge her interviewer by asking, "Now tell us about yourself, what do you do, are you an actress?" Sadly not, I'm an editor, but I'm flattered to be asked. I also write plays, but I had begun to feel extremely conventional in this setting. Léonie exudes theatricality; she wants you to be a part of the fabric of her life in art and is very inclusive.

The tradition of performance poetry, music, comedy and open mic nights continue every Sunday 8pm upstairs at Pentameters. There are also three plays programmed up until Christmas. I recommend you go along and enjoy the bohemian experience.

Léonie Scott-Matthews was chatting with Heather Jeffery, Editor of London Pub Theatres Magazine

UPCOMING AT PENTAMETERS:

MAIN SHOWS

30 Sept - 15 Oct After a successful tribute evening to Heathcote Williams, his play **THE IMMORTALIST** returns to Pentameters

31 Oct - 19 Nov **MATING BEHAVIOUR** by John Cooper

28 Nov - 17 Dec **A TIME FOR DEPARTURE**, three one-act plays by Tennessee Williams

ALSO AT PENTAMETERS

Every Sunday at 8pm 'Moon at Night', on open evening of poetry, music and theatre

Tuesday, 10 Oct at 8pm – poet David Gascoyne remembered with Niall McDevitt and Jeremy Reed.

Monday, 16 Oct at 8pm – Remembering Camden Voices, poetry with Jane Duran, Martina Evans, Daniele Hope and Peter Phillips introduced by Dinah Livingstone.

as an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music and, as a Hampstead resident, received a Camden Good Citizen Award in 1998 in recognition of her outstanding work for the community. Hampstead Village Voice awarded Pentameters 'Best Theatre, 2016' and Camden Council an 'Asset of Community Value' award.



Image: Léonie Scott Matthews with Godfrey Old Master of the Harmonica, Godfrey Old, together with guitarist Conrad Blakemore is a member of rock band MAD DOG BITES who often perform at Pentameters and are frequently joined by drummer Jon Moss of Culture Club.



Monday, 4 Dec at 8pm – storytelling and music with Dawn Ellis and guests.

Sunday, 17 Dec at 1pm, 2pm & 3pm – Punch & Judy shows for children.

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