

Euton Daley stands down as the CEO and artistic director of the Pegasus Theatre this month after 23 years at the helm. For the dedicated team at Oxford's youth theatre it is a bit like Manchester United losing Sir Alex Ferguson.

Euton, 54, will enjoy the comparison as he is mad about football and at one time dreamed of a career in the beautiful game.

From the age of 18, he has focused on developing inclusive participation in the arts and, among other things, has worked with Greenwich Young People's Theatre, The Royal Court Young People's Theatre, Northampton Royal Theatre-in-Education Company and Leaver's Experimental Arts Project.

He has directed professional projects with Hounslow Asian Theatre Company, Tara Arts, New Perspectives and the M6 Theatre-in-Education Company. He has also performed in radio plays for the BBC.

His is not a nine-to-five occupation, but for Euton and his wife Yasmin Sidhwa – head of creative learning at the Pegasus – it has been a way of life.

Euton's own life could be the subject of a drama. His parents Pernell and Hezekiah were part of the Windrush Generation.

He was born in 1958 in Westmorland, Jamaica, and not long afterwards Pernell and Hezekiah headed for the UK to find work – leaving Euton and his three siblings behind.

Euton recalled: "Although our parents were not with us we knew we were loved. We lived with our extended family and I remember the warmth and the banter. That is what I miss for my own children – we do not have any extended family living near us."

There was a lot of frustration in his early life.

"I suffered from asthma and was always being told to 'keep still' as if my life depended on it – but I cannot keep still. I always have to be doing something," Euton said.

"I can picture my five year-old self dragging a stick along the railings of a park watching other children running around. Another vivid memory of Jamaica is going to the capital, Kingston, from our rural backwater and being mesmerised by the buzz of activity and the noise of hooters

"All I remember about school is being hit with a ruler across my knuckles for writing with my left hand! (being left-handed was seen as a sign of backwardness). You can be sure I tried my best to learn to write with both hands."

Meanwhile, his parents had moved from Bristol to Birmingham and settled into a two-up-two-down house in Aston.

This type of terraced housing, with shared outside toilets, were later bulldozed and replaced by high rise homes.

Having a house meant that Pernell and Hezekiah could send for the children and, in 1966, eight year-old Euton arrived in England with his brother and two sisters.

Two more brothers and a sister were born in England and the family later moved a few streets away to a three-bedroomed house where the boys could sleep in one bedroom and the girls in another.

I asked Euton what he remembered of the journey to the UK, but his mind is a complete blank – apart from suddenly acquiring parents.

"It felt like we were being introduced for the first time," he said.



Power behind

"Our first home was in a dead-end street, and that is where I learned to play football – not far from the Aston Villa ground. I am still a fan."

I am familiar with the environment in which Euton grew up because at that time I was living and teaching in Handsworth, Birmingham. I have a vivid recollection of an invisible line appearing across the playground on the day after Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech.

My pupils, black and white, who, until then, had played happily together, suddenly divided along racial lines.

Euton's parents will have suffered abuse, protecting their children while imbuing them with a positive philosophy of life.

Euton explained: "My mother's mantra was always to look to the future. She did not mind

what work we did – it could be sweeping the streets – but whatever we decided to do she wanted us to do it to the very best of our ability. She was just happy that none of us got into trouble with the police – as numerous children we knew did.

"My father was a practical man. He did almost all the household repairs. Those jobs he could not do, he bartered his skills – his carpentry or barber skills were exchanged for an electrician working in our home. He was a good barber – he always cut our hair," Euton said. "He also taught us to make kites and go-karts out of old crates and pram wheels."

Euton's love of football blossomed in the

Euton Daley in the dance studio at the Pegasus theatre in Magdalen Road, Oxford

Photograph: Damian Halliwell



Sylvia Vetta talks to Euton Daley MBE, CEO and artistic director of Oxford's innovative youth theatre, as he prepares to retire from the post he has held for 23 years

the Pegasus

street where he lived. "Our first home was in a dead-end street, and that is where I learned to play football – not far from the Aston Villa ground. I am still a fan," he said. "After we moved we could play in a nearby park.

"From William Cowper Primary school, just across the road, I went on to St George's Comprehensive school. In primary school, I watched children play football in the playground as if it was an organised game – very different from how we would play in the streets. My asthma was getting better and in secondary school I put my name forward for the school football team," Euton said.

"I really wanted to be a footballer, and went on to play for Birmingham District Schools. But I had problems with my knees. In my late thirties I had to give up playing when my patella ligament snapped. Both my knees have since been rebuilt.

"At least I have been able to watch my

younger brother, Tony Daley, go on to play for Aston Villa and for England."

I saw for myself how teachers' expectations of black boys in particular were skewed towards sport. They were not expected to excel in academic subjects so it is hardly surprising that, upon entering the first year of the secondary school, Euton was placed in the bottom stream.

"The following year I was moved into the top stream where I was the only black boy and there was one black girl. The culture in the classes was so different. In the top stream, some boys played chess, but none of them were keen on football. I was teased by friends in the lower class for being 'academic' although I did not feel that at all," he said.

So how did Euton's interest in drama start?

"My sports teacher believed in me and gave so much time to us. He trained us and took us to play matches with other schools three times

a week," he explained.

"My drama teacher, Laurie Walsh, assumed a similar role. In the fifth form, he told me he was short of an actor for a musical he had written. I was given the part of a lover and asked to sing," Euton recalled.

"There was always music playing at home but I had never sung in public before. The performance was choreographed and I think it was the movement that made me decide 'I like this'. So I took drama as one of my A-Level subjects.

"In the sixth form, Laurie introduced me to the Birmingham Youth Theatre. They needed a young black actor to play a black Welsh soldier in *Run Rabbit Run*. By this time I knew what I wanted to do – go to drama school."

But Euton's parents were not so keen. It did not seem like a 'proper job'. They suggested he train as a teacher of drama instead.

"I applied for an art and drama course at teacher training college, only to discover that it was over-subscribed. So I joined my parents working at the Joseph Lucas car parts factory.

"My mother was so proud because I had a white collar job in the invoicing and accounts

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white collar job in the invoicing and accounts department,” Euton said. “But it really was not the job for me.

“So when I saw an advert for an assistant stage manager at the Midland Art Centre in Cannon Hill Park, I applied and got the job. I loved seeing how the business worked and knew at once that ‘this is me’.

“I also decided to apply to two drama schools and was offered places at both. I was inspired by the brand-new course in community theatre arts at Rose Bruford College in Kent, so that is the one I accepted and went to live in Sidcup.”

To support himself Euton took part-time jobs working in bars and as a DJ.

“At weekends and in holidays I worked with young people with special needs, and loved it,” he said.

Euton produced a pile of books to show me.

“One thing was missing at home – story books. It was not until college that I became an avid reader. I needed to explore positive role models for young black men and also wanted to understand the things that create divisions between us.

“I read and re-read Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* – but I was most inspired by this book and this man.”

He showed me a copy of *Mandela By Himself* and a quote in it from a letter written by Mandela while in his cell on Robben Island.

‘A good pen can also remind us of the happiest moments in our lives, bring noble ideas into our dens, our blood and our souls. It can turn tragedy into hope and victory.’

Euton added: “At that time there was so much anger and aggression in the black community as a result of discrimination and I felt there had to be a better way. Mandela has such dignity and was not consumed by hatred despite his suffering.”

In 1980, Euton was still pursuing his passion for football.

“I headed for Birmingham at weekends to play football and, because of the problem with my knees, I returned stiff on Monday mornings and did not perform well during movement class. At the end of the first year I was told ‘You must decide between football and the arts’. Reluctantly, I dropped the Birmingham fixtures – but did not give up football altogether, instead I formed a college team,” he said.

Euton finished his training in 1981 and, with five fellow students, set up a small company called Platform 6 to tour a play based on boxing.

He said: “Our idea was to show how young fighters were often exploited by managers who took the lion’s share of the profits. I also worked part-time running a youth club and with Carl Campbell’s Dance Company 7.

“I became excited by dance when I attended evening classes at Dance Company 7 and Carl asked me to speak over the dance.

“I said ‘I will do it as long as I can move at the same time.’ That is when my love of physical performance began, which I developed at Greenwich and here at Pegasus.”

Euton moved to Plumstead when he started his first full-time post at the Greenwich Young People’s Theatre where he worked from 1982 to 1988.

“Much of our work was outreach in schools and in curriculum development. I loved running the workshops – so much that I never



took holidays. Outside of term, I worked with disadvantaged young black people on difficult estates near the Elephant and Castle or with children in care with special needs,” he said.

“I wanted to test myself as a director, so I took some freelance work with M6 and New Perspectives – only to discover that most actors were only interested in developing their careers and not community development.

“I moved on to a Quaker institution called Leavers which had the added advantage of being near the Arsenal ground at Highbury.

“I ran workshops with unemployed young people and we performed the resulting play *The Fence* in prisons. Then, in 1989, I saw a

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“I cannot live without music. I grew up with it all around me. On the island I would want recordings by Isaac Hayes or Living On The Front Line by Eddie Grant or the music of AKA Free Nelson Mandela and the performance poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson or Benjamin Zephaniah.”



Euton with his wife Yasmin, father Pernell and brother Tony after receiving his MBE at Buckingham Palace in 2008

**Bowing out
– Euton Daley
steps down from
his role at the
Pegasus this
month**

**Photograph:
Jon Lewis**



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post advertised at The Royal Court Young People's Theatre for a youth and community director."

Up until now Euton had not mentioned his wife Yasmin – and I wondered when they met. He sounded just a little embarrassed as he said: "We first met at the Greenwich Young People's Theatre. I was on the interviewing panel when she applied for a post in 1983."

Euton admits that he was the only one of the panel of four to vote against appointing her. She obviously forgave him because they married in 1990.

"Yes but she does not let me forget it," Euton laughed. "My excuse is that I wanted to develop dance in the theatre and that was not Yasmin's forté at the time."

The importance of their work in their lives is apparent.

"We had our honeymoon before the wedding because Yasmin went on tour with The National Theatre and I was about to head for Oxford and the Pegasus.

"I had been enjoying working at the Royal Court but was impressed by Pegasus's reputation for work with young people, so applied for the post of director. I hedged my bets in case it did not work out by keeping my London house.

"I had great support from Di Tickell (who is a community activist supporting grassroots voluntary organisations, such as Asylum Welcome) and lived in her garden summerhouse for a while. I met her through her son, Dominic, who worked for at the Royal Court with me. Di helped me settle.

"My first impression of Oxford was of a divided city," Euton said. "As the bus drove down The High, students in gowns poured onto

the pavements, Champagne glasses in hand, but, in 1990, the Cowley Road looked neglected.

"Di said to me 'Do not give up. There are plenty of us willing to work to bridge the divide.' And she set about introducing me to lots of different people in the community"

Euton was missing Yasmin as they did not get to see each other very much. "It was not even every weekend," Euton said.

So when a job share post came up at Pegasus, Yasmin applied and was appointed.

"We decided to make Oxford our home and bought our house in Temple Cowley," Euton said. "That is where our children have grown up."

Euton admitted that he wanted at least a six-a-side football team, but Yasmin put her foot down at three children.

Fourteen year-old Akasha is a dance enthusiast while Ishy, 17, is into football. Kema, 19, looks set to follow his parents into a career in community arts. He is currently reading sociology and psychology at Brighton but is also involved in the Parasol Project, which works to promote and provide inclusive play, social and recreational opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children and young people in Oxford.

While talking about his children Euton produced two books, Lenny Henry's *Charlie and The Big Chill* and *So Much* by Trish Cook.

"These are possibilities for the island because they will remind me of reading to our children. It is something I did not experience as a child and which I loved doing using different character voices. All my children loved these two books," he said.

What highlights will Euton recall from his time at the Pegasus?

"I am particularly proud of Mesh, our

bi-annual International Youth Arts Festival when 150 young people from across the globe come together and over ten days make friendships and create excellent work. Language is not a barrier.

Thanks to Euton's efforts you can now sit in an air-conditioned theatre under a roof which does not leak in a state-of-the-art premises with changing rooms and up-to-date technical

equipment. How difficult was all this to achieve?

"It was a dream which took 15 years to come to fruition," Euton said. "We set up a charitable trust and the community raised more than £300,000. Because of that support, in 2006, we won a grant of £2.7m from the National Lottery through Arts Council England. But we had to find £7.4m!

"Philip Pullman has been a tremendous supporter and gave us a generous donation as did the city and county councils.

"So, in September 2010, we reopened to the public having carried on during the redevelopment with our activities in other spaces around the city."

In 2008 Euton's work was recognised with an MBE and he went to Buckingham Palace with his father Pernell, Yasmin and his footballer brother, Tony.

"My dad died three years ago soon after that picture was taken, so it is particularly poignant for me. I miss him. Some people have pointed out how alike we are in looks."

Euton showed me a wind up watch.

"It was dad's. If ever I feel low, I wear it and feel his calmness. He was an incredible calm man."

Pegasus has just celebrated its 50th anniversary with a year-long series of events and activities, so it seemed a good time for Euton to step down.

Although resigning from the post of CEO he is not retiring but wants to explore new avenues while still working with young people.

We had come to the moment where he had to make his final desert island choice.

As well as football and dance, Euton also has a passion for music.

He said: "I cannot live without music. I grew up with it all around me. My father loved reggae and gospel.

"On the island I would want recordings by Isaac Hayes or *Living On The Front Line* by Eddie Grant or the music of AKA Free Nelson Mandela and the performance poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson or Benjamin Zephaniah. My art is political but peaceful.

"I would also need to take my notebook where I write down lines of poetry as they come to me. I developed my own line of performance poetry during the miners strike."

"But I have got to have music on the island or I am not going," he laughed.

