

What Katie did next . . .

Sylvia Vetta talks to Katie Read, a theatre director on a mission to make the arts more accessible to all

Dynamic theatre director and publicist Katie Read is only 37, but her CV includes an impressive record of successful theatre productions. She can even boast of assisting Harold Pinter direct his last production and was once assistant director to Sir Trevor Nunn on Tom Stoppard's trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*.

Although those experiences are precious to her, her mind is now fixed on her latest venture The Saturday Matinee Company. Having worked at the National Theatre she knows how theatre is easily accessible to the comfortably off but not on the agenda for those who struggle to make ends meet.

The idea behind her no-frills theatre company is to put on high-quality productions using new and exciting plays at a price anyone can afford.

Katie and her young family live in Woodstock, where she is best known for directing the town's 2014 *Passion Play* which made an indelible impression on all who saw it.

So where did her passion for theatre come from?

"I was born in Chatham in 1978. My father Richard Read was a hydrographer in the Navy. He wasn't present at my birth as he was at sea a great deal in those days. I was breech and my mother Nikki, who now lives in Oxford, likes to say that I have been difficult ever since!" Katie said.

"When I was three months old my father was mostly working on ships out of Plymouth so my parents moved to Tavistock. Between the ages of five and seven, with my three sisters, Sally, Lizzie and Anna, I enjoyed a special time in

Mississippi when my father was posted there.

"After school we could walk to the beach and in holidays my parents hired a camper van and we toured the States. We have wonderful photograph albums of those trips and I got into the habit of writing diaries. My diary has to be one of the possibilities for the island," Katie said.

When her family returned to England, Katie's parents bought a house in Tavistock and, like many children of fathers in the services, Katie and her sisters went to boarding school. St Joseph's in Launceston in Cornwall was a Roman Catholic school for girls.

She said: "The school nurtured my love of books. My taste was for the Brontës' and anything to do with King Arthur, poetry and particularly the Romantic poets. I was a serious student and by the time I won a scholarship to the sixth form at Taunton School, I had developed a passion for theatre.

"I have particular happy memories of those two years. I made fantastic and lasting friendships and we had fun as well as a good education.

"I played Medea in a school production and was given the opportunity to direct plays and I quickly set my heart on a career in the theatre. I loved English literature too and from then on they were complementary threads in my life, theatre and books. I am lucky that I have been able to use both in my career," Katie said.

That was clear from Katie's choice of degree. She read English and Theatre Studies at Leeds but theatre studies gradually had the upper hand.

She explained: "I had it in mind to apply to the London Academy of Music and Dramatic

art (LAMDA) to train as an actor after my degree but when I was given the opportunity to study theatre directing at Drama Studio London as well, I took that instead. My friends were cross with me, but I observed that actors have to be vulnerable, completely open and lacking in self-consciousness.

"Directing requires emotional intelligence but allows a little distance: like being behind the camera instead of in front of it. I liked thinking of how the space worked and finding the natural rhythms of a piece. And I love working in technical detail with actors on text."

A well-known fact about any work in the theatre is that until you become a household name it does not pay well and the cost of living in London is expensive. So Katie's story is one of being adaptable in order to earn a living.

"In 2000, I set up a company called Hands on Theatre and we played to audiences in Drayton Manor Pub in Ealing. There was no funding so we all had jobs around rehearsals. I had taken a morning cleaning job with a rich family in Bond Street," Katie said.

"They paid me well and that income enabled me to support myself while directing Hands on Theatre's first productions. We produced *Blue Remembered Hills* and *The Libertine*.

"*The Libertine* was set in cabaret style in a pub and it was awarded Critics' Choice in *Time Out*," Katie added.

Following the success of that summer's season of plays, Katie and her colleagues discussed how to use the proceeds.

She recalled: "We could pay ourselves or use it to rent a space nearer the centre of London.

Continued on page 11

Katie Read

Photograph:
Richard Cave

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island Oxtopia.



From page 9

That is what we chose to do. We rented space in Battersea Arts Centre, I felt that *Blue Remembered Hills* was the better production so we repeated it.

"We had real bark on the floor and had the characters running around the audience. One of the actors had a friend who was a lighting technician at the National Theatre and he arranged for equipment that projected clouds."

Following this production Tom Morris, then the artistic director of the BAC and the theatre director who went on to win awards for his Broadway production of *War Horse* telephoned Katie.

"He said 'I went to see your show. It was very special. I want you to come and see me,'" Katie recalled. "So I met him and he said 'I want *The Libertine* for my *Time Out* Critic's Choice season in the Studio Theatre."

"I told him that our production had worked well in a pub setting but I did not think it would work in a studio. There was Tom offering me this amazing opportunity and I was saying 'No! He persuaded me but it did not do as well as it had in Ealing so I like to remind myself that my instinct was right," Katie said.

"However, it did lead to the opportunity to assist Mick Gordon directing *The Walls* by Colin Teevan and from that to being awarded the Bull Dog Prince Bursary to spend a year as trainee director in Residence at The National Theatre Studio.

"I enjoyed the mentorship of Paul Miller and I shared a flat on the Lambeth Walk with actor Nicholas Tennant. I was only 24 and already in the thick of it. In retrospect I was too shy and too young to really make the most of it.

"After the bursary, I went straight on to work with Trevor Nunn on *The Coast of Utopia* by Tom Stoppard and during this nine month contract,

one of the lead actors, Simon Day, asked me to direct his new version of Turgenev's *The Country Doctor*.

"It was also during this time that I formed a close working relationship with David Bolger. He was the artistic director of his own company, Cois Ceim, an Irish theatre company in Dublin and I went on to spend a great deal of time there working with him. In 2005, our production of *Chamber Made* set in a hotel room won us a Fringe First award at the Edinburgh Festival," Katie added.

"I was balancing assisting people like Terry Johnson at the Royal Court with putting on my own shows at fringe venues and teaching at drama schools such as Arts Ed.

"I was only 25 and my CV was reading really well but it was a struggle financially to live in London and it got to the point that I had to forgo moving into another place with Nick and my best friend, who had by that time joined us in London, and move back with my mother to Oxford!

"It was a hard thing to accept then and really brought home to me that thus far, I had sacrificed a more traditional and more comfortable career path in order to pursue my passion. I became a frequent commuter to London on the Oxford Tube, many times making use of its 24-hour service to enjoy press parties until the early hours!" Katie laughed.

Katie took a break from the theatre to save some money by doing a data entry temping job for Oxfordshire County Council. While sitting at the computer in the council offices she received an e-mail from a West End producer she had met a few months previously.

"I could not believe what I was reading," she said.

In 2004, Katie was being offered a life time

opportunity to work with Harold Pinter on what was to be the last play he directed before his death in 2008.

"I managed to get myself living in London again and I remember going to meet Harold for the first time in Holland Park," Katie said. "I was not as vocal or as strong as I am now that I am older. Standing on the doorstep, I made a resolution. I told myself there is no time for shyness or muttering. I must not be too in awe. I let my voice come out and be confident and began working with Harold Pinter."

And so Katie was hired to assist Harold in directing a production at the Comedy Theatre of Simon Gray's *The Old Masters*.

"The rehearsals were wonderful," she recalled. "He was incredibly generous. He involved the understudies from day one. The main rehearsals were from 1pm to 6pm so I could rehearse with the understudies all morning.

"It was a process the understudies really appreciated and felt included. In my contract I had to direct the main rehearsal on two days when Harold was away. Harold said to the cast, 'I am going to leave you in the very capable hands of this young lady'

Turning to me he said, 'If you change it, I will only be intrigued,' Katie said.

"When he left me the lead actors just sat down and talked to each other and ignored me. I had to earn my spurs. I was fortunate because in one of my regular trawls of bookshops in Oxford I had found a copy of an old book which was about that particular time in the art world. It included quotes from Berenson and Duveen. I had it with me at that rehearsal.

"I opened it and took it over to show the actors. They were fascinated by it. Once we'd

Continued on page 13

From page 11

had a good look, I said simply, 'Okay shall we go from page 71 of the script?' and we did!

"That evening, I walked out on a high and I telephoned my dad. He said 'You sound just like I did the first time I successfully brought my ship alongside!'

Katie added: "I felt close to Harold and he gave me a lot of time. He was generous in asking for my opinion for which I will always be grateful. He insisted I assist Lindsay Posner directing *The Birthday Party* and it was a real treat to work on one of his plays while we were still in contact.

Then I directed *The Room* with Henry Woolf at the Pinter Festival at Leeds University. It was a great time in my life. The signed volume of limited edition poems by Harold that he gave to the cast and company of *The Old Masters*, has to be a nostalgic possibility for the island."

In 2005, Katie met her future partner Peter Morgan in *The Gardeners Arms* in Oxford. At the same time, she was looking for an occupation that allowed her some financial stability in between theatre jobs so that she didn't have to resort to temping or waitressing all the time.

"I sought an occupation that could give me financial stability and the possibility of a family life. So I set up Read Media and got a retainer contract promoting 'How To' books and built the company from there. Books have always played an important part in my life and I certainly cannot go to Oxtopia without a collection of my favourites," Katie said.

"Peter is a planning consultant in the private sector. When I became pregnant with our son Theo in 2008, we decided to settle here in Oxford and for a while I focussed solely on my work within the publicity company which I still enjoy successfully managing today."

Peter and Katie bought a house in Woodstock and have since had a daughter Sasha who is now two years old.

"I got to know Clare Haynes who is curate of St Mary's Woodstock. She asked me if I would direct the town's *Passion Play* in 2014. It had a cast of around 40 and over 1000 people came to watch it on the day. We 'crucified' Jesus in the town square and processed the body to the museum. All the onlookers everywhere fell into complete silence at this point, it was very moving," Katie said.

"The rehearsal process and the performance itself created such a wonderful sense of community, crossing age, gender and even religion as members of our company were Hindu, Muslim, agnostic or even atheist. Another possibility for the island has to be this poster signed by all the cast. It was such a memorable experience and reminded me that I had to somehow fit theatre into my life again.

"My son Theo watched me in rehearsals and I remember thinking how important it is for our children to see us at our best, doing the thing we love."

By this time Katie had got to know the actor Amy Enticknap and, through her, the actor and writer Gaye Poole. She talked to them about her latest idea and together they combined their talents, experience, passion and complementary personalities and formed The Saturday Matinee Company.

Jeremy Spafford, the director of The Old Fire Station, liked the concept of no-frills



Katie Read and her running shoes – a must for Oxtopia

productions and was very supportive. He later admitted though that he was happily surprised that all three productions in January sold out.

At the core of the company is a standard format of new plays of one hour in length to be performed at Saturday lunchtimes.

Early this year I saw their first production *Collider* by Shaun McCarthy. The scenario was that the biggest scientific experiment in history, the Large Hadron Collider is about to be switched on. Scientists are confident it will prove that the universe began with a big bang; religious creationists fear it will create a black hole and destroy the world. Science and religion (and burlesque) are about to collide.

Every performance was sold out and Katie will now be staging four productions a year from now on at the venue.

"As it develops, I hope the company will grow a reputation for creating high quality, affordable theatre with productions which will change lives and minds and be recognised as a

'hothouse' for developing new writing and new actors."

The next, a new play by local writer Gaye Poole called *Connie's Colander* which is about Alzheimer's. Sufferers describe how their brain begins to feel full of holes, hence the title.

We had come to the moment when I had to ask if she could only take one thing what it would be.

Katie said. "I can't go without my running shoes. I have always run. It is how I relax. But I couldn't be without my books and my diary either. I will sneak a few extras into Peter's bass guitar case, Theo will be wearing his football kit and carrying his ball but Sasha could hold a few extra books as she'll be wearing her Elsa dress. I am going, so are they!" **LE**

• *The final performance of Connie's Colander is on Saturday, June 6, at The Old Fire Station. Tickets are old on the basis of "what you think it is worth and what you can afford", payable after the show.*