



ABOVE LEFT: Montage of pictures from past productions adorn the wall in the bar area. ABOVE RIGHT: The refurbished bar.

New stage in theatre's history

For almost a century, the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich has entertained, educated and inspired. Now it is beginning a new chapter, writes Rachel Buller.

Stash Kirkbride and Peter Beck understand more than most the importance of a thriving community theatre as a training ground for the arts. Having both started their acting and stage careers treading the boards at the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich 25 years ago, they returned to take the helm as its joint creative directors with an ambitious vision.

Nine months later, the theatre has undergone a transformation which the pair hopes will re-energise every aspect of the venue, boosting audiences, attracting visitors and engaging more effectively with the business community. Thanks to ongoing support from the Friends of the Maddermarket and Stash and Peter's commitment to building partnerships with local businesses, the new year has seen the opening of a freshly refurbished bar, studio, backstage area and office space. Parts of the auditorium have also

been refreshed and they have created an exciting new programme for the coming year to attract audiences young and old.

The new theatre bar and gallery has been given a theatrically inspired overhaul and will host events, concerts and will be home to art exhibitions showcasing the talents of East Anglian artists.

"It very much celebrates the rich heritage of the theatre," says Peter. "Copper piping runs along the top with dressing room bulbs hanging down, and set in glass on the bar are wonderful old copies of plays from our archive which have been performed here over many decades. We want people to be standing at the bar talking about what they have seen."

Now run in partnership with the Norwich-based Redwell Brewery, the bar boasts a giant montage of photographs from past productions dating back 70

years, and in the corner sits a beautiful grand piano.

"The bar will now also be home to the Norwich Jazz Club every month and will see regular performances from Chamber Orchestra Anglia, who are also going to be using our newly refurbished office space as their base," says Stash.

The impressive studio space is also undergoing a major renovation and will be named the Emerson Studio Theatre in honour of Maddermarket stalwart, director Ian Emerson.

"It is going to be a fantastic resource for the whole community," says Stash. "We want it to be used by new writers, as a space for drama school, for Pilates and dance classes, stage management courses and for performances."

Key to the theatre's long term success is maintaining its army of volunteers. "We have 10 members of staff who head up the core departments and then



ABOVE: Joint creative directors, Stash Kirkbride and Peter Beck in Maddermarket Theatre's auditorium.

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each of them has a large team of fantastic volunteers doing everything from stewarding and working in the bar, to making costumes and helping paint sets," says Peter. "We have teamed up with Voluntary Norfolk so that the current volunteers are not over-stretched and we can continue to find new volunteers to come in, which is absolutely essential. Every three months we are hosting a get-together for all our volunteers here in the bar and Voluntary Norfolk will also be there, so if people are interested they can find out more."

For the first time, all the main house productions at the Maddermarket,

on St Johns Alley, will be sponsored – another of Peter and Stash's ambitions for the future.

"We have 12 key sponsors as well as support from many more. We both believe that engaging local businesses to work with the arts is key to long term sustainability and is mutually beneficial," says Stash.

For now, Stash and Peter are preparing to head back to the main stage as they ready themselves for their next shows – two each of which they will be directing this year.

"We are really proud of our programme and it hopefully illustrates

our ambition on stage as well as off it. Our in-house shows include lots of comedy, period dramas and some productions which will appeal to schools' education programmes, including Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. But we are also keen to attract well-known artists and shows, and have Basil Brush, Claire Martin and Barbara Dickson," says Peter.

"We want this to be a venue for all ages at the heart of the community," adds Stash. "We don't want it to be uber-trendy or too clever, we wanted it to be inspiring and a great place to spend time for everyone." ♦

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