



The charming and romantic Theatre Royal Haymarket has stood in St James's since 1720, and has seen its fair share of drama – on stage as well as off. “We’ve got a really fun history,” says development director Kara

Crook, as she shares some of the stories that have shaped the theatre: how the Duke of York granted a Royal patent to the theatre as a favour to its then-manager; how the theatre was the first to have a matinée show and drama school; and the time Sir John Gielgud lived here during the Blitz, acting as fire warden. Another anecdote illustrates the changing face of the city. “When King George came, the crowd rushed to see him,” says Kara, whispering so as not to disturb the rehearsing performers. “On this side of the theatre, there’s a corridor which takes you out to Suffolk Street. When the show finished, the audience stampeded and we lost 22 lives down there. But the King never knew – the show went on.”

Arnold Crook, chairman of the Theatre Royal Haymarket and Kara’s father, is passionate about the magic of this place, and the story that the historic building tells. He says: “Years ago, there was a fire next door, before the Haymarket Hotel was built. Judi Dench and Maggie Smith were here, and we had quite

a substantial amount of money in the box office – but the theatre was full of smoke. It looked at one point like we might have to cancel the performances. But we didn’t.

“People were asking me, ‘What would have happened if it was destroyed by the fire?’ I said, ‘We would have rebuilt it’. But what we can’t rebuild is the history in this building. That’s what gives it the atmosphere.”

As the theatre is Grade I-listed, Arnold says that he: “can’t move a nut and bolt without getting permission.” Thanks to this, the building has retained many of its most fascinating features. Dark, lit with warm lamps, ashtrays still hang from walls, and the striking hand-painted ceiling is framed by ornate gold. Behind the stage is a room where royalty have hidden between acts, complete with old-fashioned vents for circulating air and a Victorian fireplace.

While the majority of London’s theatres are electrically operated, the Theatre Royal Haymarket is largely manual. But Arnold knows that it is this sense of tradition that gives the theatre its charm. “If you want something special, you come to the old theatres, where you feel the atmosphere as you walk in the door,” says Arnold in his deep, smoky timbre. “You

DRAMA QUEEN

We meet the team behind the majestic Theatre Royal Haymarket and get the low-down on their campaign to put theatre in the national spotlight

BY REYHAAN DAY



Father and daughter team Arnold and Kara Crook
OPPOSITE: the opulent and historic theatre

know that there's something going on here, and has been going on for years."

Hearing Arnold and Kara talk about their "jewel in the crown", it's clear that behind every door of the building lies a story – and a piece of theatre history.

Although the theatre embraces its colourful past, it is also one of London's most forward-thinking theatres. Arnold is passionate about giving younger generations the opportunity to understand the theatre industry, and has worked to make theatre an exciting proposition for young people in what are uncertain times. Eighteen years ago, Arnold helped to found Masterclass, a charity set up to put the spotlight on the industry, and to encourage those between the ages of 16 and 30 to get involved. Growing with each year, Arnold says that the theatre has hosted some 80,000 young people since the project's inception.

The main initiative of Masterclass is to help individuals learn about the work, craft and opportunities in theatre, from some of the industry's most successful individuals, including established actors, producers, directors and designers. Josh Brown, who looks after the theatre's press and marketing needs, says: "We bring these young people

into the theatre so they can learn firsthand from them – in a nice, safe, comfortable environment where the 'master' feels relaxed – and they can have one-on-one questions and discussions."

He says that given the landscape for young people going into theatre, Masterclass is needed now more than ever. "It's really difficult to get into. It's a tough industry. You can have a lot of talent, but you might not get the chance, which is why Masterclass is so important. It opens doors, and it puts you in front of the right people. It gives you a direction."

Arnold notes that finding new talent is tricky in today's climate – another reason why Masterclass is invaluable to the theatre. "The government supports culture, there's no question; but they've made lots of cuts recently," says Arnold. "Those cuts make it very difficult for subsidised theatres. As a commercial theatre, we need subsidised theatres because that's where new product comes from. Without the lifeblood

Pixie Lott in
*Breakfast At
Tiffany's*

of these young people and talents, this theatre wouldn't exist," he says frankly. "It's imperative that all theatres are busy and supported."

As well as its long-running masterclasses, the project operates TheatreCraft – a careers fair helping people aged 16 to 25 into backstage career roles. "It started here, with about 10 or 15 exhibitors. The most recent had 400 exhibitors and nearly 2,000 attendees. It was held at the Royal Opera House, as the Coliseum couldn't handle it anymore. It's just exploded."

But Masterclass takes its dedication to the younger generation further. A successful apprenticeship scheme is actively ensuring the progression of young people in their first few years within the industry – a notoriously "make or break" period for struggling performers and crew. "We've placed 27 young people; and more than 80 per cent of them have now gone on into chosen careers within their field," says Josh.

"We've currently got in the building our apprentice director, stage manager and apprentice designer. They're working on this production of *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, which stars [singer] Pixie Lott. They went up to Leicester and worked with the director Nikolai Foster and Matthew Wright, who's the designer. They've now come down here to see it become a West End show," says Josh.

As well as placing promising candidates in valuable apprenticeship roles, the Theatre Royal Haymarket also offers a showcase, putting the spotlight on new, undiscovered talent. "The showcase is on the Haymarket stage," says Josh. "The apprentices choose a play that's relevant to them, and they cast it using our database of 15,000 people who are interested in theatre. Then there's a little mini-production."

According to the team, the showcase offers an opportunity for talented youngsters to have their work seen by influential industry figures. "We try to put lifeblood back in, and give them a chance – that's what we've got to do," says Arnold passionately.

"Young people are bright, clever, educated and chomping at the bit with ideas – and that's the age when the creation and the advantages start to come. It's so desperately important that they are given the opportunity."

Kara agrees. "If you haven't got new talent coming through, then you've got nothing going forward."

With all this talk of the future, what's next for the Theatre Royal Haymarket? Arnold says that Masterclass is working on initiatives to make theatre more accessible to those outside of London, including projecting productions into cinemas across the UK. "Projecting theatre is a big area. Why should Masterclass remain only in London?" asks Arnold.

"Why can't we project Masterclass to the rest of the country, where there are kids who can benefit from what we do? I want the whole country to see Masterclass. Live streaming is the next big project that we will eventually do."

Although institutions such as the National Theatre are already making a success of screened productions, Arnold believes that making Masterclass more readily available to those outside the M25 would be a significant step forward in attracting a younger audience that is so critical to the theatre's future. "We want to know their story," says Arnold. "We want to know what they feel – their emotions. It's not out there enough, and it's a terrible thing."

The Theatre Royal Haymarket's current production, *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, adapted by Richard Greenberg, is running until September 17.