

Emigrating to Croydon...

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It may only be 15 minutes from London Bridge to East Croydon, but somehow it has always seemed to be an adventure to go to this strange satellite town to London: usually one merely passes through it on the train to Gatwick or Brighton, but if you actually exit the station, there's not just the odd sight of trams running down its streets (though they may yet make a comeback elsewhere soon), but the sense of "foreignness" is also accentuated by the fact that most people know the area as the place that resident aliens have to go to sort out an immigration issue at the nearby immigration department headquarters. That's how American-born Rhoda Koenig of *The Independent* made her first visit there some years ago; but last night she returned for only her second visit to the area for the other, sadly less typical, reason to go there.

That was to visit a dynamic, but largely unsung, little producing theatre, the Warehouse, right beside the station that also takes you to other worlds, frequently Australian, as artistic director Ted Craig, who has run it for the last 22 of the 30 years of its life since it was founded in 1977, hails from Melbourne.

In 1995, as Michael Billington (also in attendance last night) reminded me, Cate Blanchett appeared in an Australian import here of a play called *Sweet Phoebe* (you can spot the poster on the wall on the first landing as you go up the stairs); and in the midst of the controversy at home of Blanchett's recent appointment, with her writer/director husband Andrew Upton, to take over the running of Sydney Theatre Company next year, Michael recently reported in *The Guardian* that the seeds of that dissent that have met her appointment may indeed have been planted here in Croydon.

As he put explained in the feature, "Colin Moody, a leading member of the STC, has walked out, announcing: 'An Oscar for acting is not a suitable recommendation to run the biggest theatre company in the country.' But might Moody's moodiness have its origins in a south London suburb, 12 years ago? In 1995, the director Ted Craig invited the STC to stage Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe* at the Warehouse, Croydon. It was a teasing two-hander about the break-up of a yuppie couple. What most of us remember is a shining performance from Cate Blanchett. Her co-star, meanwhile, got respectful but less glowing notices. His name? Colin Moody. One can't help wondering, as Mr Moody sees his one-time colleague returning to Sydney wreathed in Hollywood glory, if his high-minded resignation is warmed by what Zelda Fitzgerald called 'the boiling oil of sour grapes'."

But long before either Blanchett or even Ted Craig debuted at the Warehouse, I had my own small personal connection to the space: an Edinburgh season I produced as a student of work directed by Nick Ward (a writer/director, coincidentally also Australian-born, who went on to have plays produced at the National and made a film, *Dakota Road*, but seems to have disappeared since) transferred here in September 1984.

Last night, however, saw another part of my life also flash by me: I was seeing a new production of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* there, Rupert Holmes' Broadway musical based on the unfinished Dickens novel, that I saw (and loved) in its original New York incarnation at the Imperial Theater in 1985, where it ran for 18 months after transferring from the Public Theatre's free summer season in Central Park. By the time it was imported to London's Savoy Theatre in May 1987, I was then working at Dewynters, the West End advertising agency, editing their theatre programmes and souvenir brochures, and we produced one of the latter for it. But the show ran for barely two months – yet another example of a Broadway hit that just didn't travel.

A few months ago I was reminded of that production when one of its co-producers sadly made the news: Bruce Hyman, who had re-trained as a lawyer after making a programme on the legal profession during his subsequent stint as a successful radio and TV producer, was called to the bar in 2004, became the first barrister in 800 years of the English Bar to be sent down for attempting to pervert the course of justice when he was caught on CCTV camera from an Oxford Street electrical store sending a false e-mail, purporting to come from the campaign group Families Need Fathers, to the husband one of his clients was in the process of divorcing. When the husband, believing it to be genuine, presented it in court at the divorce hearing, Hyman turned it against him, suggesting not just that the document was a forgery but also that the husband himself might have been responsible for creating it. It was clearly a conspiracy even more dastardly than the mystery of whatever happened to *Edwin Drood* that Dickens had left unsolved but that the musical allows the audience to. (According to the Daily Mail report of the story, Hyman was "jailed for 12 months for 'appalling professional misconduct' which could have resulted in an innocent man losing his liberty, and which has now ended in Bruce Hyman losing much, much more.")

Hyman's co-producer on that original West End flop production of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was Harvey Kass, has has gone on to an unblemished legal career – he is now legal director for Associated Newspapers, publishers of the Evening Standard, and as such made it onto The Lawyer's Hot 100 listing of the most important people currently working in the legal profession.

As I get older, I realise that the world is clearly spinning in ever-smaller circles as people and places from the past resurface, and as these links that surround a simple visit to the Warehouse illustrate. Indeed, my evening didn't end with the show, but with dinner afterwards with a friend I know from Manchester who now works for the Immigration department and so is based in Croydon for three or four days a week! And the story of the Warehouse, too, is happily set to continue even after the imminent redevelopment of the area. There are two schemes, both of which are incorporating plans for a purpose-built theatre within them for the Warehouse to occupy.