

Kevin Bourke looks at the last 12 months in the world of theatre

Library Theatre

IT'S probably fair to say it's been a rum old year for the Library Theatre Company, including the move from their historic home in Central Library after more than 50 years, the alliance with the Lowry that's enabled them to continue putting on some wonderful shows there and, most recently, the announcement of their planned move to a purpose-built new city centre building to be shared with the Cornerhouse.

In the face of such tumultuous goings-on, it might even be possible to overlook the work itself, despite its uniformly high quality. In their old home, they delivered a truly remarkable festive family show, *Grimm Tales*, directed by Rachel O'Riordan, and a hilarious, moving version of Neil Simon's *I Ought To Be In Pictures*, as well as a sublimely searing rendition of Mame's *Glen-garry Glen Ross* and a tender, touching take on Cathy Crabb's *Beautiful House*.

Their last production at their old home was a wonderful, uplifting version of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, which had been their first-ever production. Nor did the quality fall when they set up shop at The Lowry's Quays Theatre, just the opposite in fact, with a version of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* that made believers even out of those of us who've always found the playwright over-rated.

The standard hasn't dropped with their current production of *A Christmas Carol*, directed by Rachel O'Riordan and perhaps even the equal of her *Grimm Tales*.

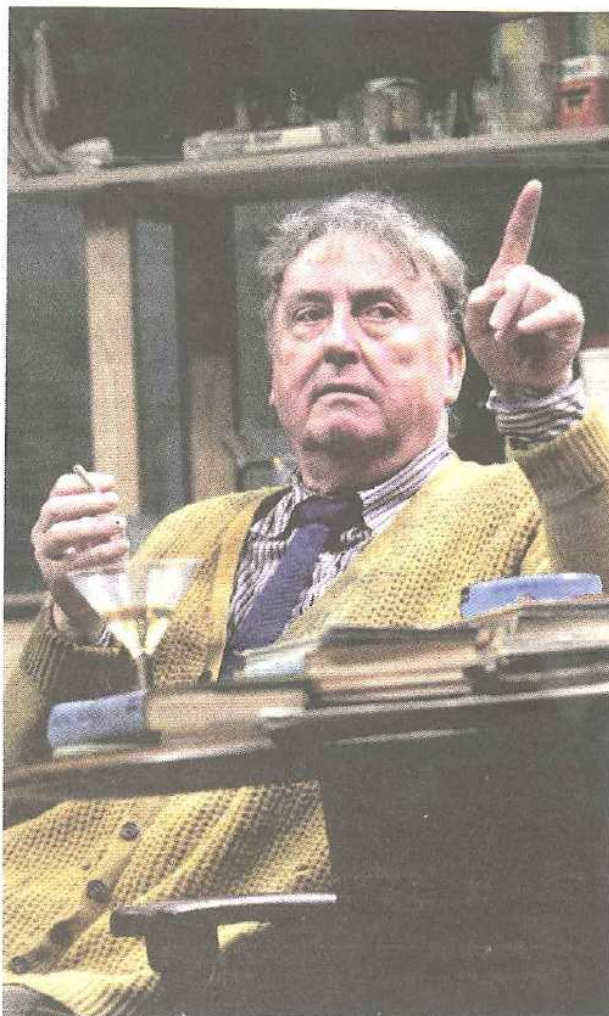
The Lowry

IT'S difficult to know where to begin with The Lowry, so rich a feast do they constantly bring to us.

They celebrated their 10th birthday mid-year and, frankly, it's now hard to imagine a theatrical scene without them. They constantly bring great dance and opera to the area but also some of the finest drama.

For sheer unashamed entertainment it was difficult to fault their family festive show *White Christmas*, while the crowds flocked to *Calendar Girls* and *Corrie!* Feelgood turned Mende Nazer's harrowing autobiographical *Slave* into an intense, triumphant piece of theatre and the Lowry Studio's venture into development of new writing paid off handsomely with *The Play That Killed Me*.

Visiting, Donmar Warehouse



FAVOURITE Desmond Barrit in *The Habit Of Art*

impressed with *Serenading Louie*, and the National Theatre brought a personal favourite, Alan Bennett's *The Habit Of Art*.

Another huge London hit ENRON had been seen to be not quite believed - investment bankers as raptors? That's entertainment!

A man who knows a thing or two about entertainment is Matthew Bourne, who brought his *Swan Lake* to the theatre once again, as well as his characteristically provocative take on *Cinderella*.

Rambert presented a world premiere of a dance piece based on Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings* and another of the Lowry's partner companies, Birmingham Royal Ballet, satisfied lovers of classical ballet with their *Romeo And Juliet*.

In a strong year for dance, you might even have managed to catch a few dazzling minutes of Carlos Acosta during Ballet Nacional de Cuba's brief visit.

in the year, it was hard not to think it more properly belonged at the Palace.

The Palace also housed *The Sound Of Music*, where many discovered, apparently to their surprise, that Connie Fisher was actually really rather good at this stuff!

People might also have been surprised to find Michael Ball done up in drag in the hugely entertaining *Hairspray*, although it's hard to imagine anything making a dent in his fans' adoration of the mighty Ball.

Also at the Opera House, *Spartanot* proved to be a whole lot more fun than such a self-proclaimed Monty Python rip-off had any right to be.

Oldham Coliseum

THEIR current traditional panto *Sleeping Beauty* is still packing them in - oh yes it is! - but, funding-wise, the Coliseum can sometimes seem like the *Cinderella* of the local theatres.

Thankfully, that's led to greater resourcefulness on their part, their lively ensemble adaptation of *The Road To Nab End* being a case in point.

Their version of *The Memory Of Water* was simply one of the best I've seen and their championing of audience-pleasing musicals like *Up On The Roof* should be heartily applauded.

The Fringe and beyond

OF course, no round-up of the year in theatre would be complete without acknowledging some of the fantastic work being created outside the big venues, where tomorrow's big-name actors or writers hone their already-considerable skills in non-theatrical spaces, above pubs and the like.

This year's 24:7 festival, although there were fewer productions, proved as inventive and invigorating as ever, while Studio Salford also boasted some great shows. Personal favourites included Ensemble 52's *Something Hidden*, starring Richard Vergette as the poet Philip Larkin. Richard also reprised his M.E.N Theatre Award-winning *As We Forgive Them*, teamed with Cathy Crabb's perfectly-formed *The Roots Of Love*, which contrasted tellingly with the love, pain and rudeness of Ian Winterton's *Tag Team*.

JB Shorts, meanwhile, continued to prove tremendous value, with half a dozen impressive pieces, none of which ran for more than 15 minutes. What's not to like?

Octagon, Bolton

DAVID Thacker's artistic direction of the Octagon continues to energise this thrusting theatre.

David himself took on not only Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and Tennessee Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) but also Trevor Griffiths' *The Comedians*, Melvin Bragg's musical *The Hired Man* and a truly impressive version of *Love On The Dole*.

Meanwhile, former artistic director Mark Babych brought back the M.E.N Theatre Award-winning *And Did Those Feet* and there were many who thought that Iqbal Kha's version of *Rafta Rafta* by Ayub Khan-Din trumped the National Theatre version of a couple of years back.

Palace and Opera House

THESE two lovely old theatres continued to bring the best and most lavish of the big musicals to the area.

So much so that, even though *Les Miserables* did sell-out business at The Lowry as well later