

“I had been at Bristol Old Vic theatre school and wanted to be an actress. I was in London, working all sorts of jobs while auditioning and doing different roles. Then I went to Chickenshed to watch a production for the first time and I was so profoundly affected by what I had experienced. I sent them a long letter afterwards explaining why I thought it was so incredible. Watching that show literally changed my life. It turned it completely upside-down.”

Rather unexpectedly, says Rebecca, they wrote back, firstly asking her permission to use some of her words to send out to potential donors and secondly to offer her a job.

“They said my letter showed I really understood what they were all about. I ended up working for Chickenshed for three years and it was an extraordinary time. I quickly realised I was actually far more suited to being a facilitator rather than being in the limelight as an actor.”

When she moved to Norfolk, it was Jo at Chickenshed who urged her to establish an inclusive theatre company in the county. It was a big ask, but such was Rebecca’s unfaltering belief in the project, she was determined to make it happen.

“I just happen to think that the best theatre is inclusive theatre. It is not about patronising anybody or using labels, just what we can achieve as an ensemble using the many different skills and experiences which everyone brings.”

Coincidentally, around the same time she returned to Norfolk, Stash Kirkbride and



ABOVE:
Total Ensemble at rehearsal

BELOW:
The ensemble has a wide range of ages taking part

OPPOSITE:
The Total Ensemble Theatre Company cast for *Boy In The Lighthouse*



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Peter Barrow were in the process of setting up the Hostry Festival and were keen to put Rebecca’s fledgling theatre company under their umbrella, a relationship which continues.

“The first year, all we did was a workshop. Gradually it simply grew from there and now Total Ensemble’s performances are an integral part of the Hostry programme.”

Rebecca, who is founder and artistic director of Total Ensemble, says some people have a very set idea about what they do, but that is often far removed from the reality.

“People think disabled, then they think children, but we are totally inclusive. We have performers of all ages; we have a four-year-old on stage alongside a 70-year-old; some members have disabilities, some don’t; some are professionals keen to get back on stage, some are complete beginners wanting experience of theatre, someone might be a wheelchair user, someone else might have limited speech. Everyone has their own reasons to be there and everyone brings

something unique to our group.”

One cast member joined Total Ensemble because he was the only one of his family who didn’t act and he wanted to give it a go without feeling any judgement. It so happened, says Rebecca, his ‘acting family’ were actual Bollywood stars.

“His mum came over to London for a film premiere and then came to watch her son act with us. She couldn’t believe how incredible the performance was and was overwhelmed by what we did – and we all got to go and see her film at Cinema City for a special screening. Maybe we will take Total Ensemble to India!”

The company doesn’t have its own premises and uses a variety of rehearsal spaces around the city while working on a show. It also doesn’t operate weekly sessions or classes, it runs instead on a production by production basis – which can often take several months.

“We always work towards a production, whether that is a commission for an event, which we always see as real validation for our professionalism, or for

Photograph: The Hostry Festival