

SALT: Fish, frolics and feisty women

Dorset families who started a new life in Newfoundland and changed the fortunes of their hometown are explored in a promenade-style play at Lighthouse Poole

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The Antelope Inn, Poole 1681, a group of fishermen prepare to leave on a treacherous journey for the hostile shores of Newfoundland to fish for cod, just as they do every year. But what if a group of brave women were to join the men this time? And what if they were to set up home in a new country?

Turn the clock back 350 years and families on the Dorset coast were struggling to survive. There was economic and social turmoil following the English Civil War, and the far-reaching impact of the Great Plague of London (1665-1666) and Great Fire of London (1666) had also taken their toll.

In Poole, the fishing community and many working people were facing ruin. In sheer desperation, the pluckiest amongst them looked towards far horizons over the Atlantic Ocean in search of a better life.

Risking all, they made the treacherous 2,300-mile sea crossing to Newfoundland on the northeast coast of Canada where they were able to establish a new community and the beginnings of a prosperous salt-cod trading link with Dorset.

This bold move would help to revive the fortunes of Poole and create a group of powerful, wealthy and influential merchants. It also forged a relationship between the people of Newfoundland and Poole that exists, often through family connections, to this very day.



Some of the locally recruited cast of Salt putting on their best fish face during a rehearsal at Lighthouse Poole

COMMUNITY PLAY

Now the extraordinary story of those economic migrants who turned their backs on the only life they had ever known and made the dangerous journey across the ocean is being told in a multi-faceted community play – *Salt*.

This ambitious production, featuring 100 local participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, is due to be staged promenade-style at Poole's Lighthouse Centre for the Arts with five performances between July 27 -31.

Created by the Dorchester-based Angel Exit Theatre Company, *Salt* grew from an earlier project that had to be abandoned because of Covid.

Back in 2019, Angel Exit co-artistic directors Lynne Forbes and Tamsin Fessey had travelled to Newfoundland, interviewed residents and even collaborated with actors in the Canadian province. Lockdown brought that project to a close, but it left the company with a solid foundation on which to build and develop a community play.

Working with writer Stephanie Dale and leading Dorset folk musician Tim Laycock as musical director, they created *Salt* through a series of community workshops with actors, musicians, puppeteers and songs. The final production includes a cast drawn from a cross-section of the local community with participants aged from just nine to 86 years of age. The artistic team recruited actors and other performers through a series of open casting workshops and weekends. 'We had no idea who would come but everyone who did is in the play,' says Lynne.

The company's commitment to inclusivity has meant a few rewrites on the hoof. 'We have one girl whose character was originally running away from her husband, but the person we cast for this role was much younger. So instead, we have her running away from her father.'

Beyond the main performances in the Lighthouse concert hall there will be a series of pop-up happenings on The Quay and in

bottom left: Dave Young, aka The Shouting Mute, during rehearsals

bottom right: Musical director Tim Laycock, with Angel Exit's Lynne Forbes talking to Jane Bull who has been cast as Elinor Warland, the wife of a retired Admiral

the town including a 17th-century flashmob, a giant salt cod puppet and a specially commissioned performance by disabled performance poet and activist Dave Young, aka The Shouting Mute.

However, it is the female experience of abandoning home and hearth and heading across the vast ocean to make a new life in a foreign land that is the production's main focus. A point graphically underlined on the publicity posters which describe *Salt* as 'a gutsy tale of fish, frolic and feisty women'.

'Times were hard back then,' explains Lynne. 'There was a cost-of-living crisis. People were hungry and cold. There were tough choices to make, particularly for women who had nothing of their own. Everything belonged to their husbands. Not only were these women leaving all that they had ever known, but the voyage to Newfoundland was extremely dangerous.'

The mid-17th century was also an era when superstition still surrounded the idea of even allowing a woman on a ship. For many an old sailor, having a female on board was considered a portent of doom.

Angel Exit also feels that there is a message for our 21st century society in this story of Dorset people forced to become economic migrants. One that will resonate with an audience who often hear negative views about the immigrants and migrants arriving in this country. 'So many don't realise that there was a time in our island's history when swathes of people on the south coast of England felt so desperate and oppressed that they left these shores,' says Lynne. 'Embarking on a treacherous journey across



above: Cast members at a workshop with Angel Exit Theatre. (Photo: angelexit.co.uk)

left: Angel Exit Theatre's co-artistic director Tamsin Fessey (left) at a *Salt* rehearsal

a huge body of water to find a new home and a better life.' Lynne is also aware that for many Poole residents, the historic link with Newfoundland remains an untold story. 'Even though we have Newfoundland Road and Labrador Drive, oak trees from Newfoundland in St James' churchyard and all kinds of connections in the Old Town, many people in Poole are simply not as aware of this important part of the town's history as they are over in Newfoundland. We felt that *Salt* would be interesting to people living

and working in the town. How many know, for instance, that the present Hotel Du Vin (on Thames Street in Poole's Old Town) was built by Benjamin and Isaac Lester who were great pioneers of the cod fishing trade? You can still see the marble salt fish cod that they placed over the fireplace.'

Even though *Salt* reveals a fascinating story that begins in 1681 and led to huge prosperity for Poole that peaked in the following century, this is a community play that also explores contemporary parallels that resonate with our society today. ● ***Salt* will be performed promenade-style in the Concert Hall at Lighthouse and on the streets of Poole from Thursday July 27 to Sunday July 30. Book at lighthousepoole.co.uk or call 01202 280000**