

the court

September / October 2021

HELLO Autumn

FROM YOUTH CLUB
TO FILM ACADEMY

Meet Ismail Wasfi

VETERAN LOCAL
PLAYHOUSE REOPENS

The Finborough Theatre

GROWING UP
IN EARL'S COURT

A boyhood view



Keeping
Life Local

Back in the Room

Earl's Court has reawakened since our last issue. Great shows at London Wonderground and re-opened local venues mean there is plenty to give you a spring to your step.

Walking around London Wonderground on the Earls Court Development Company's site has been almost normal. Sure, visitors are encouraged to wear masks, and people working at the food stands or playing in the sand with their kids keep a respectful distance from others. But at the time of writing, almost 95,000 people have wandered through the Empress Place gates to enjoy the dodgems, Star Flyer ride and the

open fronted bars. Observing them has been like watching a snail's head emerge from its shell to tentatively kiss the ground.

We've had the pleasure of catching a number of shows, including 'The Choir of Man', 'Dead Ringers' and 'Austentatious.' It has been a joy to watch actors and actresses clearly enjoy playing in front of crowds once again. Each show has at some point provided a chance for us to laugh out loud and

recognise that whilst the pandemic remains a real problem, there is light at the end of the tunnel. London Wonderground is open until 26th September, so if you haven't yet been, give it a whirl.

In this issue, we focus on London Wonderground, partly because it has been so unusual. We take a look at development news in the areas around it. As well as take a charming detour into 1950s Earl's Court by local Robert J Mortimer. There is also some fabulous news in the re-opening of The Finborough Theatre. Do take in some amazing contemporary shows at the beautifully restored and refurbished building's 50-seater playhouse by going to <https://finboroughtheatre.co.uk>.

Open Air Film Night in Bramham Gardens



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10th September | 7pm

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**THE COURT
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Keeping Life Local

Ismail's Journey: Earl's Court Youth Club to London Film Academy

When you read about what famous actors get

up to in glossy magazines, or when you sit down and watch the films they appear in, you rarely think of the journey they took to get there. Film stars tend to exist in our psyche as finished products, accustomed only to the glamorous lifestyles they live.

But we shouldn't forget their journeys either. Many took a long, hard road, and instead of simply peering into the goldfish bowl once fame has been achieved, let's start at the beginning of that road. Ismail's journey has just begun, but it's a story worth telling.

Better a late start than never

Ismail Wasfi was not a 21st century Daniel Radcliffe or Haley Joel Osment. You won't have seen his infant face in anything as you did Macaulay Culkin or Drew Barrymore. He didn't immediately know that he wanted to be an actor.

It was only when he was in Sixth Form College at Chelsea Academy, thinking of business plans to get rich quickly, that a friend told him to audition for the high school play. With nothing to lose, Ismail went for the audition and was surprised to be given a speaking part. Perhaps even more surprisingly, he'd been bitten by the acting bug.

"Slowly, I developed this kind of passion," Ismail says. "I never really thought that I'd get into it, but on the day of the high school play, after the performance I just remember feeling an adrenaline rush from being on stage. And then when I got home, I remember just being in awe and crying a lot and I knew that was what I wanted to do. It kind of hit me that there was something bigger than materialistic things, and it just made me so happy."

Finding out the next steps

So you decide that you want to be an actor. It's not an uncommon thing to want to become. Whether you're doing Chekhov at the Old Vic, or you're an extra in *The Fast and The Furious XVII*, it's a way of life that will envelop and submerge you.

But how on earth do you get started? Fortunately, Ismail had his local Youth Club to turn to. He asked them if they could point him in the right direction – any direction.

Another slice of luck was to come Ismail's way. The timeless Dame Diana Rigg happened to run the committee at Earls Court Youth Club, and Ismail got to sit down with her and pick her brains for advice.

"She sat down with me and we spoke for a couple of hours," he says. "I was asking a lot of questions about what she went through and



her perspective of the film industry as a whole. That was the first time I'd ever sat down with an actual actress, and it was she that convinced me to join an acting Saturday School."

Getting a scholarship

So much of Ismail's journey is based on humility, and seizing opportunities when they come his way. Anna MacDonald and Daisy Gili, co-founders of the London film academy, met Ismail through the Earls Court Youth Club too.

Daisy suggested attending a course that they were running, and while Ismail wouldn't be able to fully participate, he could gain vital experience just by sitting and watching.

"Although I felt left out at the end, when I was just sitting there whilst everyone was getting their certificates, it was still a really amazing experience" Ismail continues. "Plus, after that, I think she saw that I was serious about wanting to act. So she then gave me a course in collaboration with the BFI."

Do you want something enough?

What's fascinating about Ismail is the dichotomy between humility and determination he possesses. The humility to never turn an opportunity down, however

small the door may seem, but the tenacity he shows to follow his dreams.

Ismail recounts a story about how, upon receiving the bursary, his family told him that he didn't look very happy.

"Even when my family saw me, they said that I didn't look pleased," he says. "But I know I have this - I like to call it stubbornness. I know that has a negative connotation, but I have this stubbornness inside me where I tell myself I'm still not where I want to be. I know I'm still young, but it drives me on."

It would be naïve to suggest that Ismail's journey is finished. He's only just begun, and hopefully his road will take him to old age via a long and successful career on stage and television. If he can continue to harness his "stubbornness" in order to progress, we really do have a local star in the making.

Even at the tender age of 19, to have chatted with Dame Diana Rigg, Nickolas Grace, and Callum Turner over coffee is not a bad start.

Most of all, Ismail is true to himself, and historically, that goes a long way in the acting world. It was *The Bard* who penned it: "This above all, to thine own self be true".

EARL'S COURT LOCAL HISTORY

Earl's Court's Theatre Roars Back To Life

Part of a monthly series by Neil McPherson, Artistic Director of the Finborough Theatre, on the rich history of our local area and community. www.earlscourtlocalhistory.co.uk

This month I'm sailing very close to home.

The Court has asked me to write about the Finborough Theatre, where I have been Artistic Director for the past 22 years. After a sixteen-months closure, we are about to reopen.

For those that don't know (and we often find local residents who are surprised to discover a theatre right on their doorstep), the Finborough Theatre was founded 41 years ago, above the Finborough Arms pub in Finborough Road, just south of the Warwick Road, Old Brompton Road junction.

We present both plays and music theatre, concentrated exclusively on vibrant new writing and unique rediscoveries. Our strict rule is that we never present work that has been seen anywhere in London during the last 25 years, so you can always be sure of seeing something that you can't see anywhere else. And with just 50 seats, you're guaranteed a rare experience.

Despite remaining completely unsubsidised, we are lucky enough to have an unparalleled track record for discovering and attracting the finest talent. The Finborough has discovered some of the UK's most exciting playwrights. These include Laura Wade, James Graham, Mike Bartlett, Jack Thorne, Nicholas de Jongh, David Eldridge, Naomi Wallace, and Mark Ravenhill. Many of today's biggest names in theatre, TV and film started at the Finborough: Rory Bremner, Nica Burns, Kathy Burke, Jane Horrocks, Miranda Hart, and Rachel Weisz, amongst many others. Our shows regularly transfer to the West End, Off-Broadway and internationally, and our work has won countless awards.

During our long closure, we started our online #FinboroughForFree series releasing monthly free-to-view archive recordings of previous productions, as well as original online content. We will be continuing our online work even though lockdown is now



over, and it will remain – as it has been for the past sixteen months – entirely free to view.

During lockdown, too, we have built back better. Literally. The Finborough building was purchased earlier this year by entrepreneur and property investor Jason Collins who has spent the last six months renovating and refurbishing its structure.

The Finborough Theatre will finally reopen in September. Our reopening season includes the rediscovery of an award-winning play from 1980, the year that the

theatre first opened; it introduces UK audiences to new female playwrights from both Canada and Australia; and sees the premiere of a stunning black comedy from one of Northern Ireland's most acclaimed recent playwrights.

If you're a regular, or if have never been before, I do hope you will come and support your local theatre. And if you're missing your dose of local history, do visit our local history website at www.earlscourtlocalhistory.co.uk which includes an extensive history of the pub and the theatre.

The Best of the Fest at London Wonderground – July 2021

The recent Best of the Fest was a phantasm of filmmaking.

A review by William Sinclair Tod

Presented by the The Earl's Court International Film Festival (ECFF), hosted by innovative promoters Underbelly, and sponsored by the Earls Court Development Company, this 75-minute evening fringe event and community screening showcased a Directors' Choice of short films from eight years of ECFF's output.

Emerging writers, producers, directors, actors and short film lovers came together to enjoy this cinematic celebration in the iconic Udderbelly tent, enjoying a fabulously quirky and diverse mix of cinematic styles. From low-budget local horror to high-definition international documentary formats, all genres were cleverly represented.

Bringing a charitable, community-focused approach to cinema to the heart of the area, locally shot shorts films were particularly interesting, each in its own way emblematic of an ongoing and positive conversation between Earl's Court and the creative communities that live in and around it.

ECFF's mission was ably supported by the words of actress Diana Rigg (RIP, 1938-2020). As part of a charming short



film, Dame Diana advocated on behalf of the Earl's Court Youth Club (ECYC). Like the Film Festival itself, she described how ECYC actively encourages freedom of expression, creates opportunities for young people to develop their skills and does much to nurture the extraordinary raw talent of this special London community.

Best of the Fest culminated in a surprise accolade for short film producer and director Corine Dhondee. Awarded ECCF's 2021 Women in Film Award, Dhondee's film-essay was made in collaboration with Oscar-nominated cinematographer Bradford



Young, who locates himself within a lineage of visual artists actively formulating a new black aesthetic - an intellectual, creative community that he hopes to foster.

Dhondee's beautiful composition was a perfect exposition of the cultural tapestry that ECFF's organisers have woven.

The next episode of the Earl's Court Film Festival will be coming soon, and if Best of The Fest is a teaser, then the upcoming ten-day 2021 Film Festival in November should prove to be a cinematic feast to relish.

Register at www.filmearlscourt.com for details.

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26 October – 20 November 2021



The UK premiere

HOW TO SURVIVE AN APOCALYPSE

by Jordan Hall.

Directed by Jimmy Walters.

28 September – 25 October 2021



The Great Britain premiere

YES SO I SAID YES

by David Ireland.

Directed by Max Elton.

23 November – 18 December 2021



DEVELOPER NEWS

New homes for key workers on Empress Place, and in the former Seven Stars on North End Road

The Earls Court Development Company

(ECDC) has reinstated and opened up two derelict sites in Earl's Court, to provide affordable housing for key workers and people on low incomes.

As part of their commitment to addressing housing need in the Earl's Court area, ECDC is working with LOWE Guardians to provide low-cost housing on North End Road at the former Seven Stars pub, and on Empress Place near West Brompton Station.

The former Seven Stars pub has been brought back into use, with a newly refurbished Art Deco design, paying tribute to the original pub that was rebuilt in 1938. The residents at Seven Stars include nurses, teachers, paramedics, NHS workers and carers who have given so much since the start of the pandemic and will now benefit from discounted accommodation in the local area.

Meanwhile, ECDC has also brought the empty homes on the west side of Empress Place, near West Brompton Station and by the entrance to London Underground, back into use. The properties, inherited from the previous owners, have been sat unoccupied and boarded up, but are now being given a new lease of life.

The properties on the west side of the street are now providing low-cost housing for key workers and local people who are benefiting from reduced rents. On the east side, ECDC is exploring different ways for the buildings to provide affordable workspace for local businesses.

Tim Lowe, Founder & Director of The LOWE Group said: "It's fantastic to see the revival of Empress Place, and the transformation the flats have undergone since we took them on in April to turn them into quality, liveable spaces. At LOWE we believe that guardianship schemes should not only provide affordable housing, but also serve a social purpose. Our aim is to give back to those who give so much to our communities, and we are thrilled to be providing local key workers and working professionals with high-quality, affordable accommodation at Empress Place."





A New Community Hub

If you've walked down Aisgill Avenue, tucked away at the back of the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates in the past few years you may have noticed a locked-up walled garden, or you might have visited the now-unused building that sits in it at some point before.

The garden and buildings were previously known as the Replacement Homes Suite - created by the former owners of the Earls Court Development site - closed since 2016. Now, the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC) is working to repurpose it into a new Community Hub for local residents and groups across the Earl's Court area.

The space could host a variety of activities from homework clubs to evening bingo and community gardening to fitness classes. A drop-in day to hear ideas from local residents on what these activities could be took place on Wednesday 23rd June alongside an online consultation. ECDC still want to hear from residents, so if you have any ideas for the community hub then complete the survey at www.ecdccommunityhub.commonplace.is

ECDC wants to make the Community Hub a fun, safe and vibrant place, and



are working to refurbish the gardens and buildings on site to get it ready for use. That's why on Wednesday 18th August ECDC and Hammersmith Community Gardens Association held a gardening day to renovate the gardens at the Community

Hub, spending all day weeding, pruning, planting and working their green fingers to make the garden bloom.

A planning application for the change of use of the building will be submitted in due course.

The Pleasure Garden at Warwick Road

On 25th June, the Mayor of the Royal Borough

of Kensington and Chelsea, Cllr Gerard Hargreaves officially opened a playful take on the concept of the pleasure garden on Warwick Road Apron, right opposite the Earl's Court Tube station exit on the site of the former entrance to the Earls Court Exhibition Centre. Created for the K+C Festival and unveiled during K+C Art Week – the installation will remain in place a further few weeks, giving locals, visitors and passers by a new place to stop and rest, meet friends or simply enjoy the flowers.

This stunning new installation from artists Baker & Borowski creates a colourful flowering garden on land that was previously closed off and hidden away by fencing. It features a central piece of art based on a gateway to 18th Century pleasure gardens, wall murals based on flora found by the artists in the local area, flower planting and new trees, all surrounded by artificial grass for families to play on. The result is a stunning, bright pleasure garden reimagined for 21st Century Earl's Court!

The Pleasure Garden installation is one of the first in a series of new spaces to be opened up by the new owners of the development site where the exhibition centres used to be. The installation and artworks may be temporary, but ECDC's aspiration is that this space will soon again be back open to the public in a new guise. If you have ideas about how this area could be used, please email info@theearls courtdevelopmentcompany.com.



Local organisations to benefit from £180,000 Community Fund

A new Earls Court Community Fund

(ECCF) has been launched with a sum of £180,000 committed this year. The fund, launched by The Earls Court Development Company, aims to make a difference to the lives of people in the local area by offering grants to charities and community organisations that provide much-needed projects, services and activities. Local organisations are able to apply for grants of up to £15,000 per year. ECDC were pleased to for the fund, which are currently being reviewed. Applications are now closed for this year, and a further round of funding will be launched next year.

ECDC has also been recruiting volunteer members for the Grants Panel that awards funding from the ECCF to ensure local people are involved in the decision-making process.

You can find out more information about the ECCF here: earls courtcommunityfund.com

We look forward to updating you in future issues on some of the lucky recipients!

Rob Heasman, CEO of ECDC said: "By launching the Earls Court Community Fund, we hope to play a part in helping local organisations to grow and thrive whilst supporting the communities they work with."

"We know that many organisations have been working hard over many years to support local people, delivering vital support and fantastic projects; the pandemic has made this much harder. As a local business, we are pleased to be in a position to be able to provide backing for many of these groups."

**EARLS COURT
COMMUNITY
FUND**

EARL'S COURT LOCAL HISTORY

Earl's Court, A boyhood view.

By Robert J Mortimer

My family has a long association with Earl's

Court. My grandfather John Swait had a house on Earl's Court Road just south of the Hansom Cab. This was where my mother Mary and her brothers and sisters grew up.

My mother married my father Victor Mortimer and they moved shortly before I was born into No. 5 Wallgrave Terrace. Built in the 1860s, the street's name has since disappeared and now forms part of Redfield Lane. The eastern end of Redfield Lane opposite Wallgrave Terrace was originally built as Mews houses in the 1890s.

My brother Lindley and I grew up at No. 5 in the Earl's Court of the 1950s. My grandparents - along with my uncle John and uncle Fred - lived next door at No. 6, and my grandfather had a builder's yard for his business J Swait & Sons on the bomb site which is now Nos. 7 and 8. The whole area around it has now been designated Earl's Court Village.

Uncle Fred bought three houses in Trebovir Road and set up the Romney Club, a precursor of the Overseas Visitors Club which produced a large number of rooms for letting. It was sold off following his death.

Redfield Lane ran up to Earl's Court Road, a two-way road, with Gollys Garage on one side (Where Metro Bank is today) and United Dairies on the other. This is where my brother Lindley would fetch extra milk if we ran out. In the other direction lay Kenway Road and the Kings Head pub, as well as the passage up to Earl's Court Station. There is also a passage at this end of Redfield lane that leads up to Cromwell Road and Marloes Road opposite. This was always a favourite place for artists as the scenery was fuelled by gas lights and produced magic vistas.

I was born at home at No 5. The second son. During the birth my mother needed oxygen, so the midwife told my father who in this self-sufficient era ran up to the local St Mary Abotts hospital in Marloes Road and brought back a cylinder and mask on loan! If they tried this today, I am pretty sure I would not be here.

One of my earliest memories is Guy Fawkes night. Our builders' yard was transformed with a huge bonfire and firework display. In those days health and safety did not get a look in! And we all survived.

I was also fascinated by the builders' yard and would often be found playing there only



to be chased out by the workmen. In the fifties, both my uncles Fred and Harry died, and as they were the mainstay of the J Swait and Sons the business closed and builders' yard was no more.

From the age of about 5, I would walk down Earl's Court Road, sometimes with Lindley and sometimes by myself, to school. Every house at that time burned coal for heating and during the 'Pea Soupers' smogs we had to grope our way along the streets to find our way home. Our favourite trick was to inhale on a white handkerchief and see the black soot mark left after. Thank goodness for the Clean Air Act! I also

remember a sweet shop by Colherne Court where the dentist is today as a source of tuck for the way home.

It was a golden age of freedom. We could go where we wanted, no one worried about us and we were safe.

About this time the owner of the dry cleaners in Kenway Road locked himself out and being young I was put down the shoot in the door, used for dropping in clothes, to wriggle in and open up from the inside.

In Kenway Village I remember the Kings Head being festive - particularly later on when it was taken over by the Aussies, Saffers and Kiwis.

One of our playgrounds after school and weekends was a bomb site in Hogarth road (25-37). The houses had been badly hit by a bomb and were demolished down to street level. This left a super basement in one of the houses which we set up as our den. A great venue for fertile creative (and destructive) minds. How we made it to adulthood in one piece is a bit of a marvel.

I remember the toy shop just down from Gollys where I bought Matchbox, Dinky and Corgi cars. I should have kept a few as they are worth a small fortune now.

When I was bit older - around 12 or so - I worked part time in the evenings for pocket money at a small off-licence in Earl's Court Road selling booze.

In the early fifties Earl's Court road was a bit

like a village. With a Post Office opposite the station, Beatons the bakers - oh the smell and taste of a fresh loaf; a butcher; a fishmonger, and Gapps General Stores at 194-196, opposite the Prince of Tech.

It is from Gapps that I have a small scar on my chin after falling from trying to crawl up the counter to see the flour being weighed and packaged. Everything came out of sacks, tins and boxes. There was also a traditional fish and chip shop near the Prince of Tech in Kenway Road.

Mother did the cooking at home. Excellent she was too. However, just occasionally, takeaway Cod and Chips hit the menu, all wrapped up in newspaper. Later Sainsburys opened one of their first stores on the corner of Trebovir Road.

Generally, property in London in the 50s and 60s was pretty run down and certain areas - North Kensington, parts of Notting Hill, even Walton street in Chelsea - were rough.

Parts of Earl's Court were hardly an exception either as all the old large Victorian terrace houses were made up of rented rooms and bedsits which were pretty run-down and just about kept the rain out. Friends ended up three to four in a flat, with two bars of heating paid for by putting a shilling in the meter. I was lucky to be living at home with my parents.

At this time, Earl's Court was a magnet for the Colonials and became fondly known as Kangaroo Valley. This was now the swinging 60s and time for fun.

My older brother Lindley worked briefly at the Overseas Visitors Club and his experience taught him two things. First, that men were paying the bills and they only ever tipped the waitresses. Secondly, that the kitchen staff were 'earning' the most money; whole carcasses of meat were leaving by the back door.

Peter Hollis, a boy of my brother's age, lived next door at No 4 Wallgrave Terrace and he was a talented musician and played his electric guitar to mostly tolerant neighbours.

He was playing with Fleetwood Mac before they 'broke through'. My brother could see that the group lacked competent management and thought that he could possibly organise them into a serious business. However, as he is absolutely not a night owl he quickly abandoned them and the idea. Peter himself left Fleetwood Mac and joined the backing group of Johnny Halliday, the french singer where he stayed for five years or so. On one occasion he played with Johnny Halliday at the Queen's Royal Command Performance.

I lived in the area until the travel bug got me in my early 20s. After returning from South Africa many years later I popped in to see a pal I met over there, now herself an Earl's Courtier. It was fun to reminisce and retread the steps of my youth.

A FESTIVAL FOR ALL

London Wonderground, the city's summer circus of comedy, cabaret and musicals, has been open for almost two months now - with over 95,000 people entering through the gates of Empress Place, with its strikingly colourful canopy overhead.

Arts, culture and festival promoters Underbelly have worked hard to ensure that everyone can enjoy the festivities, including visitors with disabilities, who have simplified access to London Wonderground and the shows, with priority seating and convenient use of all facilities.

Underbelly has been producing shows that are entertaining, comfortable and safe for more than 20 years, so they know a thing or two about making things accessible for people with disabilities - seen and unseen.

All performance venues have dedicated wheelchair access. Front of house staff are more than happy to guide and offer help if required to people that are visually impaired, and special access can also be offered to those in mobility scooters.

Additionally, if a disabled guest has a friend or carer with them, staff will do their best to offer them priority seating.

If you have a disability of any kind and would like to contact London Wonderground about priority access to London's most remarkable festival of entertainment, contact access@underbelly.co.uk or boxoffice@underbelly.co.uk.



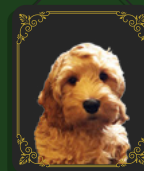
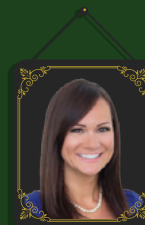
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