

Robin Mills met Gabrielle Rabbitts in Lyme Regis



© Gabrielle Rabbitts Photograph by Robin Mills

This autumn will mark my eighth year as the Director of the Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis. It's a role I thoroughly enjoy and I have taken the theatre charity, which was near closure when they approached me for the role, through a complete turnaround.

I'd describe my childhood as unconventional. I grew up in Symondsbury College, now Symondsbury Manor. My parents separated when my brother, Gideon, and I were small and Mum moved to Bridport. Running the school was demanding, so we had a series of untrained 'nannies' who were supposed to look after us; I remember one 'cooking' an unopened tin of beans in the Aga and almost blowing the door off! Gid and I were largely left to our own devices and loved playing around beautiful Symondsbury. Summers were the best: as Dad could take time off, we would go on holiday to Italy, where we had friends to stay with. The warmth, the taste of simple pasta dishes eaten outdoors, picking up porcupine quills, and waking at night to electrical storms—such wonderful memories!

Music always played at home. I'm part of the generation that didn't have life before Bob Dylan or the Rolling Stones; they are like extended family to me. From a fairly young age, Mum took us to see live music as she loved dancing. We went to festivals, folk clubs, and the Westpoint for Custer's Last Blues Band on a Sunday.

Bridport, a live music hub, was a great place to be a teenager. The Cavity and The Bull both had open mic nights that I would sing at. In bands, we'd put on nights at Bridport Arts Centre or the back room of The Bull. As well as performing, we did all the promotion, including poster design and marketing.

After A-Levels at Weymouth College, I moved to New Cross, London for a degree in English Literature and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths College. Students would cross over from directing to acting, writing to music—it was all fluid, and I loved it. However, my passion was acting. I took parts in several MA productions and plays friends had written. Dennis Kelly (co-writer of *Matilda* and now a successful screenwriter) asked me to be in a play, *Debris*, which we took to a couple of small venues before it went on to Battersea Arts Centre. After Goldsmiths, I had a variety of small jobs—working on indie art films, assistant directing a play for Mike Hodges (*Get Carter*), and recording vocals on house tracks for my friend Paul Sng (now a documentary filmmaker). Stimulating as they were, these jobs did not cover the rent so I found a job in the city. I quickly found my place in corporate event management but after a few rewarding years I got an offer I couldn't refuse: to return to Dorset and run the Electric Palace.

A few years earlier, my Dad had bought the Electric Palace, a condemned former cinema, at auction. He and my brother had worked hard to bring the building up to standards, but both wanted to step away. Seeing an opportunity perfect for my skillset and interests, I moved back to Bridport and took over the business. I'd taken a huge risk, and an even bigger pay cut. The Palace had mounting debts and no forward program. However, my years in business, combined with my arts background, gave me the tools to create change.

I learned to negotiate, write press releases, and manage staff—on the job. Once I'd streamlined processes, improved efficiency and got the programme in a healthier place, things improved financially. It took a couple of years of late nights, six-day weeks, and not paying myself for periods to turn the place around, but we got there.

To attract higher-profile artists like Johnny Marr, Stiff Little Fingers, and The Proclaimers, I needed to increase capacity. We made the dancefloor bigger; I built relationships with agents to get the venue noticed and promoted the Palace's growing reputation, highlighting its quirky, unique art-deco interior. As things got rolling, I could bring in bigger names to further elevate the venue's standing. The Palace was grubby, loud, vibrant, and live—and I loved it for what it did for the Bridport community. An audience is a united body. Gigs are one-off special moments that you witness as a collective. You sing together, dance together—to a performance that will not be repeated.

I booked Grandmaster Flash as my first international artist when I was six months pregnant with my first child, Rafe. Everything was about growth at that time. The Palace was on

supercharge, I had a new life in my belly, and stilettos on my feet. Flash was old-school; I remember counting out his fee in cash in the dressing room before he went on stage.

Both my children, Rafe and Ramona, were born at home—19 months apart. With a birthing pool set up in the kitchen (hired from the Dorset homebirth group), I didn't even give hospital a second thought. Why would I let someone else stage-manage the greatest gig of my life? Being undisturbed, to give birth naturally in my home and then get into my own bed felt entirely right.

Rafe was born four days after I stopped work. I took four months off before returning part-time. Around that time the venue was surprise nominated by Ian Gillan of Deep Purple for Best UK Small Independent Music Venue. We received a silver award at the House of Commons.

I could work with one baby, but with two, it was impossible. After Ramona arrived, I made the heartbreaking decision to sell the Palace but was proud to pass it on with a 12-month forward programme, an award and a healthy profit on the books.

My husband, Iain, and I decided to take full advantage of my time off. We bought a camper van, let our house, and took the little ones travelling. We were away for 18 months in total, spending some of the last months in Portugal where Iain had built an off-grid house. We travelled across Europe—to Poland, Romania, Greece—getting as far as the Black Sea and then Morocco. It was an incredible maternity leave!

Arriving back in the UK, I welcomed the timely offer from the Marine Theatre. A charity, with a supportive Board of Trustees who gave me operational freedom, the Marine had a clear identity—and sea views from the auditorium and dressing rooms. I made changes, recruited my own small team and, within two years, we had paid the debts and were reporting a small surplus. Four years on and the theatre has grown in success and is now almost entirely self-funded. I have a passionate positive team and we are now producing a programme that surpasses expectations for a small UK venue. To bring about real change, you have to truly believe in what you are doing, have confidence in your own capabilities, and trust in your team.

It might feel like gigs just pop up, but to put on a good show, it passes through a lot of hands—programmer, marketing, advancing, finance, then the tech team. The last call is with the lights and sound. It is essential for all of us in these roles to aim high; we create the pre-state onstage, the welcome for the audience that determines the mood of the whole evening.

In a time when the promotion of division dominates the news and social media, small town theatres strive to unite communities, providing large-scale cross-generational community plays, youth theatres, seniors dances and access to culture for all. These precious historic theatres are at the heart of small towns and desperately need to be protected for the next generation. ;