

NO PAST REQUIRED

PREVIEW

THE THEATRE WHICH PRIDES ITSELF ON RISK-TAKING HAS DONE IT AGAIN, ACCORDING TO CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN

IMAGINE going to an interview where the best way to get the job was by having absolutely no previous experience.

It might sound crazy, but that's the very formula that has made the Bush Theatre the diamond in Shepherd's Bush's cultural crown for more than 30 years.

Its latest play, *How to Curse*, by Ian McHugh, could hardly be a better example. Written by a first-time playwright; directed by a first-time director; and lead-acted by a first-time actress; you could be forgiven for thinking it a case of the blind leading the blind.

"It's true," says Bush executive producer Fiona Clark. "We take risks by only putting on plays that have never been seen before, but that's the beauty of not having 300 seats to fill every night."

The Bush, with only 88 seats, can afford to take chances because it does not suffer from the same pressure to rake in cash by churning out safe – and very often boring – box office hits.

It is a design that Fiona, 40, of Dawes Road, Fulham, says "provides the ideal set

up for being able to nurture new talent", adding that by being so small The Bush also gives spectators the advantage of never being more than a few feet away from the actors.

The audience at *How to Curse* will get up close and personal to the theatrical debut of Emily Beecham.

Spotted for her extraordinary talent by the Bush's newly appointed artistic director Josie Rourke while studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (Lamda), Emily, 23, of Barons Court, became an obvious choice for Rourke's own directorial debut in *How to Curse*.

Aware of the stereotype of actors as people escaping from their own identity, Emily describes her passion for acting as a result of her tearaway attitude as a kid.

"I think my parents – John, who's a pilot, and Carolyn, who's an educational psychologist – always knew I wasn't going to follow the traditional path they might have hoped for," she says.

"I suppose I was, and still am, a bit eccentric. I used to force my cousins to put on plays when I was a little girl so I could act my heart out in front of the family," she laughs.

Today, rather than accosting family members, it is the minds of strangers that attract her the most – and the stranger the better.

"I love spending time with what some people would describe as 'fruit loops'. The people at the extremes of society give you a wider perspective of what it means to be

human, which besides being good for the soul also helps the imagination that you use when acting."

This far-fetched fodder may have helped her in previous TV roles where "I often end up playing a murderer", but may not be quite as relevant for Emily's role in *How to Curse*.

Her character, Miranda, is a sexually frustrated 17-year-old that Emily says she can relate to well.

Caught in a destructive triangle of unrequited love, Emily says that most people should be familiar with Miranda's feelings.

"Obsessional, no perspective and no other objective in life than the person you fancy. Rejection is a very hard thing to take at that age," she says.

Is Emily secretly in love like her character? "No," she exclaims, adding: "Well, maybe in a secret and unrequited way," as she let slip that she might have more in common with Miranda than we are meant to know. Increasingly isolated from friends

'THE BUSH WAS AN UNLIKELY EXPERIMENT, AND IT STILL HOLDS FIRM TO THE FOUNDING PRINCIPLES'

and family, Emily has slowly discovered that solitude is very much a part of the life of an in-demand actress.

"It's so fast but you don't want it to stop," she says, her chirpy voice slowing to a halt. "Rita Tushingham, an actress I look up to, once said to me that she didn't believe in age, and I want to be like that. I want to stay full of life and inspiration."

It's all possible, thanks to the theatre's enduring legacy. It still holds firm to the founding principles of the inspirational and enthusiastic Brian McDermott who, 34 years ago, gathered the Bush's first audiences by appealing to crowds while standing on beer crates at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park.

What began as an unlikely experiment has grown into an institution. Hundreds of original productions later, Fiona is proud to say one of the most recent plays the theatre took a chance on, *Elling* by Simon Bent, has been seen by more than 70,000 people, if you include its transfer to the West End.

Whether *How to Curse* has the same success or not, you can be sure that the fact it has passed the 'Bush test' means it will be anything other than ordinary.

● *How to Curse*, by Ian McHugh. Mon-Sat, 8pm. Tickets £9-15. Sat matinees, 3pm. £10. Until November 10 at the Bush Theatre, at the corner of Goldhawk Road and Shepherd's Bush Road, W12. Call: 020 7610 4224 or visit www.bushtheatre.co.uk Interested in seeing your script performed? Submit it to the writers' development programme.



BUSH RANGERS: Al Weaver (left), Emily Beecham and Robert Boulter in *How to Curse*

Picture: MARC BRENNER