

MUSIC

with Helen Clarke



Beth Rowley
So Sublime
Single
(Blue Thumb)
May 12
★☆☆☆☆

IT MUST be a difficult time to be a young, female singer/songwriter. Everyone wants a piece of them but before they've even released a record, they're labelled as the next Lilly or Amy.

As a white soul singer, Beth Rowley falls into the latter. Behind the mass of blonde curls, her voice is silkier than Winehouse's, but in ironing out those kinks, the passion is lost. You just don't believe her.

Her debut album is released later this month. Its first single, *Oh My Life*, was A-listed on radio 2 and *So Sublime* is sure to follow.

Painfully middle of the road, file it next to James Blunt and The Lighthouse Family.



Hot Chip
One Pure Thought
Single
(EMI)
May 12
★★★☆☆

THE ELECTRO geeks release the second single from their rock/dance crossover album, *Made In The Dark*.

Uniquely Hot Chip, it's got their brand of laid back, repetitive, electro melodies running through its heart.

Along with their last single, *Ready For The Floor*, it's the highlight of the album, which at times feels self-conscious.

One Pure Thought is reminiscent of New Order in its ability to capture heart-breaking sentiment through blips and bleeps and is more accessible than its contemporaries such as LCD Soundsystem.

A complex track that sounds stark and relaxed thanks to a clever attention to technical detail.



Ladytron
Ghosts
Single
(Nettwerk)
May 12
★★★☆☆

AHEAD of their fourth album release next month, the Liverpool electro gurus ease back into things with an infectious synth-pop record.

The band have come a long way since the minimalist, haunting sound of their 1999 singles *Playgirl* and *He took Her To A Movie*. With every album they've layered on more and more sounds and the tracks have become more polished and warm.

Ghosts sees them giving Goldfrapp a run for their money. Kicking off with a stomping, glam-rock intro, it melts into a glossy, sultry track that shows off everything they've learnt over the past decade.

It's still got the spooked, far-away tinge that's become their trademark, but it's less startling than their earlier, stripped-back, Kraftwerk-esque sound that set them apart.

informer review

NEW TALENT: Bola Agbaje, who wrote *Gone Too Far*

PUT PEN to paper and see what happens. That is the advice of Leo Butler of the young writers' programme at the Royal Court Theatre.

"Whether personal, political or fantastical, if you feel passionately, write," he said. It is advice wisely heeded by Polly Stenham and Bola Agbaje, two of the latest wave of Royal Court writers who, says Leo, are "changing Britain's theatrical landscape".

Polly, 21, who wrote *That Face* at the age of 19, last week saw her first play transfer to the West End's Duke of York Theatre for a 10-week run, making her the youngest playwright in the West End for more than 40 years.

She has been awarded a £15,000 grant from the UK Film Council to rewrite the play as a screenplay, and is in the final stages of her second commission at the Royal Court.

Bola, 26, who wrote *Gone Too Far* when she was 24, won the 2008 Olivier award for outstanding achievement in an affiliate theatre.

She will see her play revived on the Royal Court's main stage this July, in the final stages of writing a second Royal Court commission, and is setting up an outreach programme to inspire others.

Yet while both girls seem destined for theatre greatness, neither saw it coming.

"I'd just come back from travelling in South America and started an English degree at University College London," says Polly. "I only had about

eight hours of classes a week, so I thought I'd better do something with my time or I'd just end up being naughty."

Her passion was fiction writing, having "never harboured a desire to write plays". Fortunately for theatreland, Polly failed to find a course in novel-writing and decided instead to submit a script to the Royal Court young writers' festival in 2007.

Bola, whose play was also selected for the 2007 young writers' festival, had always wanted to be an actress. "When I was a kid I'd see movies like *Annie* and *The Goonies*, and wanted to be a part of the adventure," she says.

It was not until she saw *The Gods are Not to Blame* by Nigerian writer Ola Rotimi at the Arcola Theatre that she shelved her Hollywood aspirations.

"June 8, 2004. I never forget the date," says Bola. "That was the turning point. I thought 'Oh my gosh', I'm usually studying the actors, trying to be like them, but now I want to create something like that."

It took Bola two more years of writing on the back of receipts while working at Foot Locker in Oxford Street to build up the courage to test the water.

"I had lots of story ideas, but didn't know how to put them on paper," she says. "Then I typed young+writers+programme into Google."

Dawn Walton was there to meet her. One of the tutors on the Royal Court's three-year-old Critical Mass initiative, a scheme specifically designed to seek out and develop black and under-represented ethnic playwrights, she is familiar with Bola's tale.

"It's amazing how many young writers have that moment of 'Oh, this can include me' when they see a play by someone of their own ethnic origin," she says. "With Bola it was Ola Rotimi. With Levi David Addai, now on his third play at the Royal Court with *Oxford Street*, it was Roy Williams."

Both Bola's classes with Dawn Walton and Polly's with Leo Butler ran for two hours once a week, for 10 weeks. The aim was to provide practical tips and critical awareness to help each student complete a play in a four-week spell at the end of the course. At that stage the best plays were taken on for production.

Leo says: "I'm not a teacher as such, but I try to encourage and hopefully inspire writers to believe in themselves."

The support is a factor Polly cites as one of the keys to her whirlwind success. "At first the writing exercises felt weird; it was all so stilted and really strange," Polly recalls. "But after 10 times of trying you'd say 'Yeah, this is OK!'"

The hardest part of the journey was, however, yet to

come. Once the play was accepted, Polly struggled with the redrafting which needed to be done before rehearsals.

"I remember sitting in my pyjamas, in tears on my bedroom floor," she says. "There's a four-man argument in *That Face* I must have re-written 20 times. Trying to be in four people's heads at once is incredibly hard to push and I'd just blundered my way into the whole thing."

That time, director Jeremy Herrin came to her rescue with a calming phone call. "I'm so grateful to everyone who helped me at the Royal Court," Polly says.

"Writing is lonely; you do it on your own and you can easily start to doubt yourself and think that you're stupid or that your work is useless, but you just have to push on through," she says.

Bola agrees. "When I joined the course I finally felt like I was on the right track. It's good to hear that everything you're doing you've been doing right," she says.

Thinking back to jotting ideas on the back of receipts, Bola remembers her days at Foot Locker. "Some of my older colleagues would look at me and say they used to be dreamers too, but that 'life had somehow got in the way'. When I heard them say that, I said: 'Nah. This is my life; nothing's getting in the way!'"

Her play, *Gone Too Far*, is about the idea of not belonging, and not knowing where to belong. "I was born in Hastings, where I was the only black in the village," Bola begins to explain. "Next we moved to Lagos, but I couldn't speak Yoruba so I wasn't considered Nigerian. When I came back to England I wasn't considered English either because of my African accent, and among blacks I was no good because West Indian was cool and African wasn't."

Writing, as well as meeting more Africans while studying media at Greenwich University, helped Bola find a sense of identity and renewed pride in her roots. On the back of her success she plans to start her own outreach education

initiative. "We need to re-educate on so many levels. All this negativity and knife crime that surrounds young people, it makes me fear for the future," says Bola, who lives with her family in Camberwell. "Black history is not just that we came from slaves. There's so much more civilisation before that. If we can make people feel like they've come from something, then they will believe they can be something."

Polly's play has also helped her through a difficult time. Her father, Anthony Stenham, died the day after Polly found out the play was accepted by the Royal Court. "We used to go to all sorts of crazy fringe theatre together since I was about eight or nine years old," Polly says. "Some kids go to football, but that was our thing."

She dedicates the play to her father, but is keen to state it is not autobiographical. *That Face* centres around teenage bullying (Polly went to an all-girls boarding school) and an affluent, dysfunctional family mired in emotional violence.

These are just two of the success stories of young writers who dared put pen to paper. Polly and Bola – two girls, two very different walks of life, and just the tip of the iceberg of the talent discovered by the Royal Court since George Devine first called for

scripts from unknown writers in 1956. Polly says: "I know I'm a complete rookie, but if anyone is to take a lesson from what I've learnt, it's that writing a play is not magic. "I worked hard, I was helped by the right people and the timing was right too."

"There are so many people out there who could be amazing writers and just don't know it yet. The structure is there, all you need to do is use it."

The 2009 young writers' festival script call is open until May 31. Applications to the young writers' programme and critical mass programme are welcome all year round.

Anyone aged 13-25 can enter by sending their script to: Young Writers Programme, Royal Court Theatre, London SW1W 8AS, or emailing it to yw@royalcourttheatre.com

Details at www.royalcourttheatre.com/anythingcanhappen

● *That Face*, by Polly Stenham is at the Duke of York's Theatre, St Martin's Lane, until July 5.

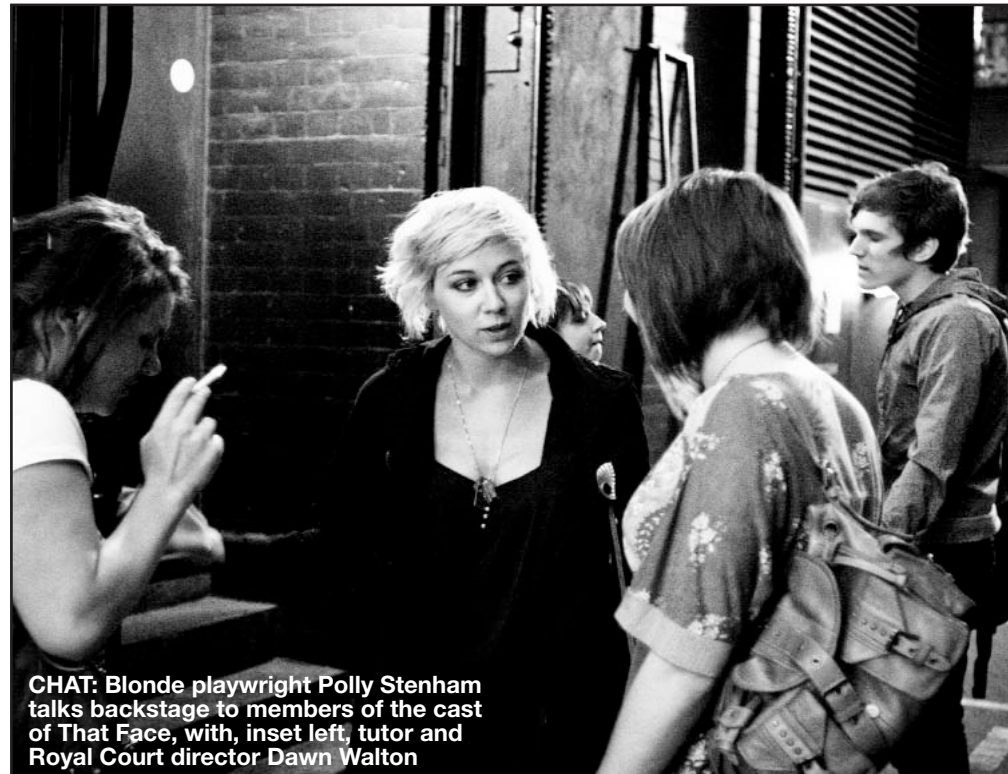
● *Oxford Street*, by Levi David Addai, is at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs until May 31. Mon-Sat 7.45pm. £15/10 concs.

● *Gone Too Far*, by Bola Agbaje is at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Downstairs from July 23. Mon-Sat 7.30pm. £5-25. For Royal Court details call 020 7565 5000 or see www.royalcourttheatre.com

£20-45. Mon-Sat 7.30pm, Wed/Sat mats 2.30pm. Call 0207 292 8330 or see www.thatface.co.uk

THIS TIME IS THE WRITE TIME

THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE WANTS YOU TO PICK UP A PEN, PUSH YOUR MIND TO THE LIMIT, AND FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF TWO OF BRITAIN'S FINEST YOUNG WRITERS, POLLY STENHAM AND BOLA AGBAJE. CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN MET THEM



CHAT: Blonde playwright Polly Stenham talks backstage to members of the cast of *That Face*, with, inset left, tutor and Royal Court director Dawn Walton