

WHAT'S ON

'Similarities are key to ending segregation'

Felicite du Jeu is a woman on a mission.

The *Waking the Dead* star's new play *Spiked* aims to dissolve school-gate segregation by encouraging mothers to venture beyond their natural social groups and support one another.

It's a subject the Islington-based mother feels so passionately about that she's not only penned the play, which opens on April 16 at the Pleasance Theatre, but has crowdfunded its entire production.

Born in France, du Jeu has lived in the UK for twenty years and describes how she was "shocked" by the segregation she saw between mothers at the school gates – and the frustration and competition between women this promotes. The issue, she feels, is one very specific to London.

"London is so multicultural and you have extreme wealth next door to extreme poverty, especially in Islington where I'm based. It's beautiful that you have that mix," she explains.

However, du Jeu was disappointed to find this does not lead to mixing: "It's very innate in all of us is that we feel more comfortable in our own world with codes we know. We're scared of what we don't know – it's very human. We worry about saying the wrong thing."

However she feels we're really missing out by not learning from each other. "It's a shame because you grow by reaching out, I think." These are the

Playwright and actor Felicite du Jeu talks to **Annie Scott** about *Spiked*, a new play at the Pleasance hoping to end school-gate segregation

conversations she hopes *Spiked* will encourage.

"What I'm really trying to broach with my play is that, yes, we all come from different cultures – but we shouldn't be afraid of that difference. Of crossing that threshold and saying: 'I don't know. Teach me!'"

The play is set in A&E, where three mothers from very different backgrounds anxiously await news about their children who have all been taken mysteriously ill. As they confront unresolved tensions in their lives, the boundaries between them break down and they realise they have something to learn from their children.

The play also highlights just how much mothers have in common. Du Jeu should know – as part of the project she's spent time meeting with, talking to and recording local mothers from all walks of life, with the help of charities Islington Giving and the Cripplegate foundation.

Whatever their background, she found all mothers invariably said they wanted the same things



The cast of *Spiked*, written by Felicite du Jeu

Picture: CHRIS MANN

for their children. "Health, education and happiness. Good manners and kindness." She sees these similarities as the key to unlocking segregation between mothers.

"We all share similar aspirations and so let's reach out to each other and talk about this rather than talk about our differences. Let's bridge the divide."

"If I manage to open a discussion between two mothers who wouldn't have spoken before or raise tolerance in somebody's mind then I feel I will have done a good job."

Not content with trying to break down social barriers, du Jeu is also tackling another big issue in her life – the underrepresentation of women in their 40s in film and theatre. This was what lay behind her decision to start her production company Pepperbox.

"I've felt increasingly frustrated seeing all my friends struggling with being mothers working in the arts. There's a real ageism going on in theatre and in films for that age bracket."

"One of the main reasons for creating Pepperbox is there are not that many parts for actresses of that age that are interesting. You have beautiful young lovers parts, then you have great older women parts – but that mid-range doesn't exist."

"I started by writing parts I would love to have. In *Spiked* I've written three meaty parts for women, where they have a lot to play. And I thought if I give a job to these actresses I would rather have all the jobs in the production be women of that age bracket too because it's underrepresented in theatre and there's no shortage of amazing women out there."

She adds: "I'm really proud. I



have an amazing team of women and I really hope this will kick start other productions where the majority part of the production team will be women over 35."

Pepperbox Theatre's *Spiked* runs at the Pleasance Theatre in Islington from April 16-28.

event

Operetta

King's Head regulars Charles Court Opera stage their final production at the historic venue, which is due to move to larger premises this year.

The boutique opera company – famous for its popular alternative pantos at the Upper Street pub theatre – stages a typically fresh version of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic masterpiece *The Mikado*.

Set in the British Consulate in the Japanese town of Titipu, the scheming, slippery Lord High Executioner hatches one plot too far, with hilarious consequences for everyone involved.

Featuring timeless songs such as *A Wandering Minstrel*, *I've Got A Little List*, and *Three Little Maids From School*, the hilarious satire is a treat for operetta fans.

Director John Savournin said: "It's exciting to look at the setting with 21st century glasses on; to consider it's place in today's social climate, and to embrace afresh it's humour, pathos, and the downright genius craftsmanship of one of Britain's most prolific writing partnerships."

Dan Crawford opened the King's Head as a fringe theatre venue in 1970 and over the years it has helped to launch the

careers of numerous performers including Alan Rickman, French and Saunders, Hugh Grant and Joanna Lumley.

But it is set to close at the end of the year before moving to a 250 seat auditorium and an 85-seat studio theatre in the £400 million Islington Square Development.

Until then, there is a packed programme of theatre and opera including in September, a radical English language updating of Verdi's *La Traviata* transposed to the world of contemporary sex workers.

Further details from kingheadtheatre.com or from boxoffice@kingheadtheatre.com.

