

Manifesto looks at the issues that count

A friendly revolution has snatched power from the city's leaders and delivered it to bread-kneaders, stonemasons, egg painters, flower arrangers and conjurers. **Tamzin Lewis** reports.

POET Julia Darling's manifesto has little in common with contemporary political declarations.

In her new city, all luxury flats are confiscated and all property developers are called to the great hall for retraining in creative play. Supermarkets are barricaded and chain stores are closed.

There are no brown signs, information stands or mobile phones.

After writing an initial manifesto, Booker-prize nominee Julia was commissioned by Northern Stage artistic director Alan Lyddiard to expand her ideas into a witty and uplifting musical. So musical director Jim Kitson teamed up with her to compose the tunes and has been working with Julia since last autumn.

The result of this collaboration, *A Manifesto for a New City*, premieres tomorrow at Hexham's Queen's Hall before a short

ADAPTED: Jim Kitson, musical director of Manifesto.



nationwide tour. It features the songs of a napping clerk, a bilingual bus driver and some really annoyed property developers.

The inspiration for the manifesto was a trip to Barcelona last year which tied into a series of events surrounding Northern Stage's version of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell was a militiaman in the Spanish civil war at a time when anarchists defeated Franco's army in Barcelona.

Jim, 43, says: "Julia was struck by why Newcastle didn't have a sense of its own identity and her poems were a non-political response following

a trip to Barcelona. At first she was interested in someone who had sweeping powers to change a city. This idea of utopia failed, but in the end, the things which succeeded were unexpected. The musical has grown out of this."

He says putting Julia's words to music was not difficult. "The better the words, the easier it is to set them to music. It is reasonably easy to set Shakespeare to music. The more dismal the words are, the harder it is. Julia's poems are very good, a joy to work with. So the process of writing the songs has been marvellous."

As *A Manifesto for a New City* is the work of a poet, it isn't a play, but it isn't



CAST: Northern Stage rehearsals for Manifesto, above, and poet Julia Darling, inset.

exactly a conventional musical either. Julia has described it as a "warm evening of music, chat, theatre and cabaret."

The first half of the show is acapella while the second half has a different musical flavour with backing tracks and sparse instrumentation accompanying the lyrics. Musically, Jim has incorporated different styles including pop, folk, rock and roll and cabaret.

Jim says the manifesto looks at small or seemingly unimportant issues or objects: "At a time of electoral manifesto, you assume politicians have a well worked out agenda. Then the Labour Party are attacked by the Conservatives on a tiny issue like planning permission for travellers. This wouldn't really surface unless there was an election and it is one issue upon which the government might lose the election. It is little issues like that which end up being very important to people."

He adds: "*A Manifesto for a New City*

raises the issue of whether there should be compulsory afternoon napping or whether we should ban brown information signs. Should supermarkets close? These small things end up being very important."

The musical is performed by the regular Northern Stage ensemble of eight actors along with two trainee actors. The production is stripped down with a set made up of 49 chairs to emphasise commonality. It will be the last Northern Stage performance directed by Alan Lyddiard, who has stepped down from his role as chief executive.

● *A Manifesto for a New City* is at Hexham's Queen's Hall on March 31 and April 1, 7.30pm. (01434) 652477.

Alnwick Playhouse on April 23, 7.30pm (01665) 510785.

Customs House, South Shields, April 25-27, 7.30pm (0191) 454-1234.

Arc, Stockton on Tees, April 28, 7.30pm (01642) 525199.



EARTHY: Lady Salsa pulsates to Cuban beat.

Prepare to be dazzled by Salsa

Lady Salsa throws Cuba's history, politics and music into a user-friendly melting pot for this spectacular.

The dazzling show traces the history of the island's music and dance. Earthy slave rhythms lead to elegant jazz, and Spanish guitar music blends with dance to create salsa, for which Cuba is famous today.

The show is set in the streets of Havana, where the people rumba, mambo and cha-cha their way through dictatorship and revolution. Leading the cast is Trinidad Ronaldo, one of Cuba's most famous actresses, who has performed for more than 50 years across the world. She is accompanied by gorgeous dancers and a funky 12 piece Cuban dance band.

First performed at the 2000 Edinburgh Festival *Lady Salsa* moved to London's West End under the stable which produced hits *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever*. The show's fans have included Kylie Minogue and Sir Richard Branson.

Lady Salsa is at the Sunderland Empire until April 2 at 7.30pm. Box office: (0870) 602-1130.

A treasure trove of gags for all the family

Treasure Island at Newcastle Theatre Royal until Saturday

AUDACIOUS is perhaps the best word to describe Andy Cannon and Iain Johnstone.

Styling themselves Wee Stories, they take to the stage with adaptations of stories that are anything but.

They may each boast twice as many legs as Long John Silver but that's a fraction of the number required to flesh



out Robert Louis Stevenson's tale of piratical skulduggery.

But with a chest full of tricks and Scottish charm, they pull it off.

Last year it was King Arthur et al with piles of cereal packets. This time

they play two shipwrecked souls on a raft, and armed with little more than a double bass, a ukelele and umpteen empty champagne bottles, to bring an epic tale to life.

Oh, and as luck would have it, they are also marooned with a battered copy of *Treasure Island* itself. It's Andy's favourite book but Iain has nicked it.

Together, to keep themselves amused, they

enact the story, eliciting a lot of audience participation along the way.

While it might not help you pass an exam, this version of the classic yarn is an enjoyable treasure trove of verbal and visual gags.

Both myself and the kids laughed along and it made me consider renewing acquaintance with the book.



DAVID WHETSTONE AT SEA: Treasure Island's Andy Cannon, left, and Iain Johnstone.