



Catherine Tate and David Tennant in *Much Ado About Nothing* at Wyndham's Theatre in 2011, and (below) Digital Theatre Plus' home page

# Digital route to Shakespeare

Digital Theatre Plus is continuing to break down the barrier between many teenagers and top quality theatre, whether that be Shakespeare or Sondheim. Aleks Sierz meets the company's creative chief, Fiona Lindsay, formerly of the RSC, and hears how her passion for enabling young people to experience drama more directly has personal roots

For some students, the "thought of having to get to grips with a Shakespeare set text for exam purposes is terrifying," says Fiona Lindsay, creative producer of Digital Theatre Plus, the website launched in March last year as the educational arm of Digital Theatre, the online company founded in 2009 that rents films of some of British theatre's greatest hits, such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, starring David Tennant and Catherine Tate.

"It's vitally important that young people gain a true and relevant experience of theatre, including Shakespeare, while they are at school," says Lindsay, who deplores the way that drama has been sidelined in the national curriculum. She is not alone. Last November, authors and actors including Michael Morpurgo and Sheila Hancock signed an open letter to education secretary Michael Gove, warning that devaluing English literature and drama in the new curriculum risks making culture the preserve of the elite.

In this context, new media can be a real help to teachers by providing students with high-quality cultural education. Digital Theatre Plus offers resources for a selection of productions, including Jonathan Pryce's *King Lear* as well as *Much Ado About Nothing*, David Suchet's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and new work such as Abi Morgan's *Lovesong*.

When I interview Lindsay, she is just finishing a meeting with actor and singer Maria Friedman, who is contributing an in-depth interview to the Digital Theatre Plus' resource pack on Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, which she directed at the Menier and which transferred to the West End, winning the Best Musical prize at the Evening Standard Awards.

As well as filming documentaries and interviews with the creative teams behind each production, Lindsay also commissions detailed written study guides on each play and films workshops to support classroom teaching. "When the actors themselves demonstrate aspects of their craft, this is usually infectious and

inspiring," she says.

The same could be said for Lindsay. She is vivacious and enthusiastic about her mission. She says: "Our driving ambition is to break down the barriers that can prevent young people from having the best possible access to a rich cultural experience and to offer a resource that engages, excites and educates."

For her, it is personal. She remembers being a 16-year-old schoolgirl and not understanding a thing when her teacher taught *Hamlet* in class. But after training at the Queen Margaret Drama School, Edinburgh, in 1982-85, and treading the boards for five years, she joined the education department of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992.

At the RSC Lindsay became the producer of festivals and events, creating performance projects, exhibitions, festivals, talks, demonstrations and concerts, as well more unusual events such as theatre couture shows, football matches and bespoke tours. She was part of the team that worked on the Complete Works Festival,

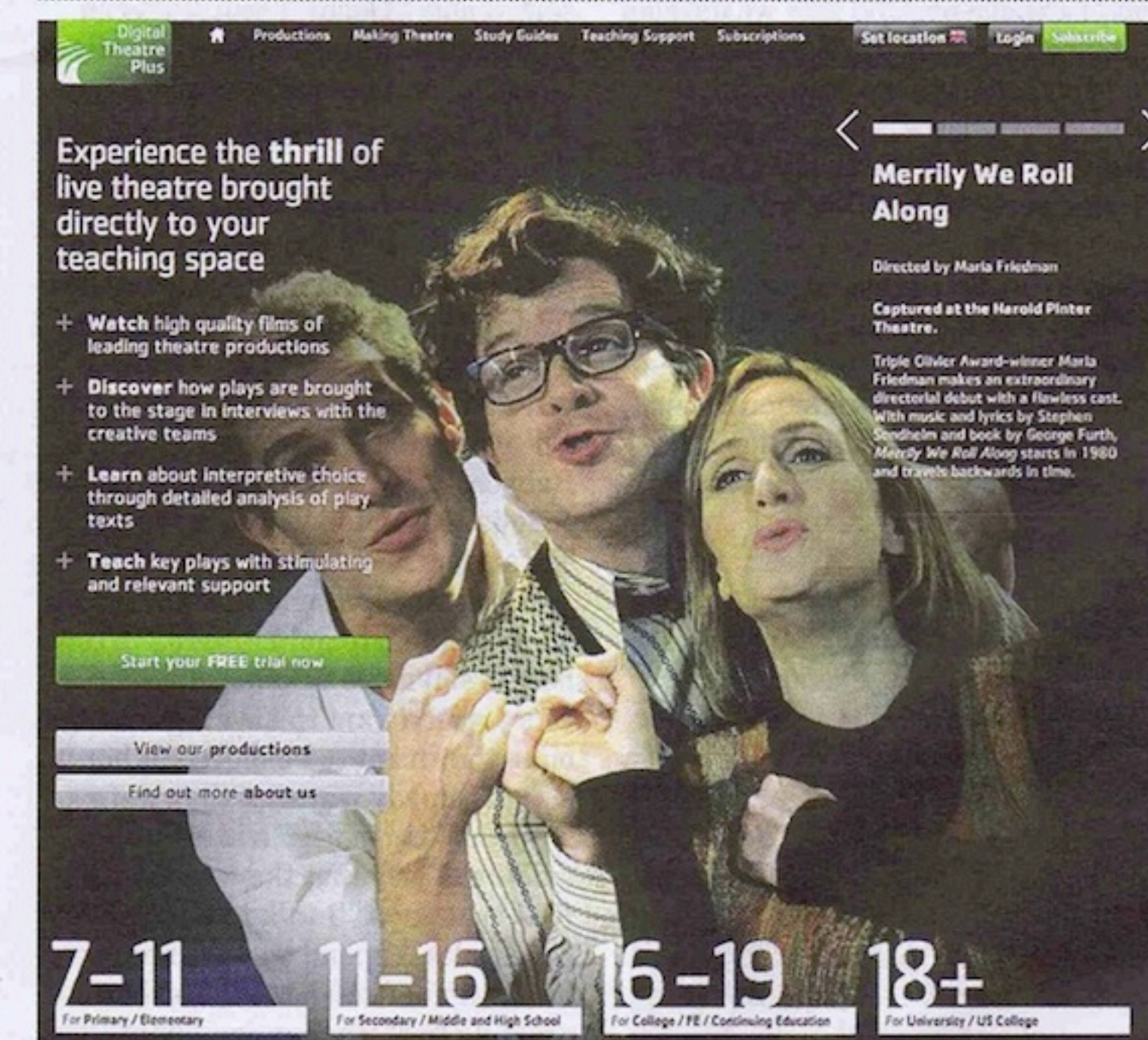
delivering 500 events in 2006/7.

Since leaving the RSC in March 2008, Lindsay has worked not only for Digital Theatre but also as a freelance interviewer on the literature festival circuit, as well as writing and presenting arts programmes for BBC Radio 4 and Sky Arts. The range of her activities gives her a good perspective on bringing Shakespeare to young people.

"It would be great if Shakespeare could be experienced and not just studied at school," she says. "My son, who is 17, formally met Shakespeare for the first time at age 12 and has studied it since. But that word 'study' seems to go against the sense of pleasure and joy that could be gained from these great plays." By experience she means "seeing the plays, and participating in them. I think you learn a huge amount about something through enjoyment and not just by being tested on it."

"All of the shows presented are theatrically successful and all of our interviews are long-form," she continues. "You can watch them in sections, but they are not just short snippets. What can you learn about Shakespeare in three minutes?"

This resource's content is rich in variety and educational value. "It includes material from different theatre partners," says Lindsay. "All the theatres we work with have education



Fiona Lindsay

## Digital Theatre timeline

- **2009:** Digital Theatre, founded by Robert Delamere and Tom Shaw, launches.
- **Jan 2011:** Digital Theatre Plus launches, with study guide to *All My Sons*.
- **Feb 2013:** First teaching support film, *Shakespeare in Your Space*, released.
- **Sept 2013:** Digital Theatre Plus accessible to 1,000,000 students worldwide.
- **Dec 2013:** All Digital Theatre Plus productions and interviews available on iPad and iPhone.
- **Jan 2014:** *Merrily We Roll Along* available on Digital Theatre Plus, with in-depth video interviews with the cast, creative and technical teams.

departments but we are able to showcase all of their work together. That's a big plus." Subscription rates are based on school size, length of subscription and educational level, and vary from about £250 to £2,500.

The project began with five plays and is expanding every month. "Now we are in 30 different countries worldwide and in about 300 different educational establishments. And working with a huge number of students." Digital Theatre Plus says it gives access to original West End productions online to more than 1.4 million students from all over the world.

Lindsay's ambition is to create different types of interactivity. "At the moment, we have pause buttons and can illustrate passages in interview with extracts of the shows. In the future, there's the potential to use the techniques of the video gaming industry to create a virtual world, allowing you to make a show from start to finish, casting it, designing it and directing it. The technology is there to do that." And it is there to help overcome the terror of young people being confronted, for the first time, by the difficulties of learning about Shakespeare.