

REWRITING

THE SCRIPT

Maggie Norris is changing the lives of vulnerable young people with her innovative theatre company. Debbie McQuoid meets the powerhouse and her star players »

*Photographs Liam Duke
Styling Lauren T Franks*



Maggie Norris, centre, with members of her inspiring theatre company, The Big House



Founder Maggie Norris

In a cavernous theatre space in Hackney, the cast of *The Realness* arrive to get measured for their costumes. They congratulate each other on getting a role in The Big House Theatre Company's latest production. The room is bristling with excitement and energy, but mostly whispers of, 'Where's Maggie?'

The anticipation is for Maggie Norris, founder of The Big House and surrogate mum to them all. Norris first dreamt up The Big House while directing a West End musical set in prison, and working with offenders for research. Shocked to discover 27% of the adult prison population, and 40% of the under-21s, were care leavers, she sought to intercept the seemingly direct route from care to prison.

'The more I know about care, and what happens when people leave, it's no surprise,' she says. 'There are things we take for granted that they've never had. Many of them are lucky if they get a meal a day.'

The Big House has an open-door policy, welcoming any care leaver in need to their bi-annual 12-week courses, which combine drama, literacy, life skills and employment lessons, and culminate in a production that emerges from the stories and experiences within the group. *The Realness*, a brand-new urban musical (by Maureen Chadwick and David Watson) about an ex-offender who turns his life around, will be the company's third production. The first, *Phoenix*, was such a success it extended

its run by three weeks, and along with the second, *Baby/Lon*, garnered great reviews, with critics rating the acting standard as 'universally high' and the visceral energy of the actors unlike anything they'd felt before. (Norris favours immersive performance, where the audience follows the action in a 'promenade' setting.) Several of the performers are now professionals.

'But it's not a quick fix,' says Norris. 'You can't just put these youngsters in a play and then drop them. That would be hugely damaging. It's a long journey we're going on. There's a community we're nurturing here. Youngsters come and go as and when they need, and are allocated mentors, who work out 12-month plans for them. We make a long-term commitment to each of them.'

Started with Norris' own money (a lump sum from a theatre in Leicester that revived a musical she'd written), funding comes from private benefactors, charitable foundations and the community, all based on the strength of the performances. 'People are surprised by what our members can achieve,' says Norris. 'There's no patronising, "Oh, didn't they do well." They're so moved by the productions that they come forward with opportunities for them.'

'THE WORK WE'RE DOING HERE IS SO IMPORTANT. I CAN SEE THE IMPACT IS HUGE'

The community does care about the young people in their midst and this gives me real hope.'

It's hard to get Norris to talk about herself, she is so brimming with enthusiasm and genuine love for 'her youngsters'. But her own story is just as fascinating. Born in Bolton, she moved to East Berlin with her communist father as a child. She went on to turn their story into a film, *Mrs Ratcliffe's Revolution*, starring Catherine Tate.

As well as being an inventive writer and theatre director, Norris has been a regular on our screens for decades (she played Claire Palmer in *Coronation Street* in the 1990s), but her full-time job now is, without a doubt, The Big House.

'People keep asking me if I want to go and direct in the West End - I have no desire to do that at all,' she says. 'The work we're doing here is so important.

I can see the impact is huge and the need is great, it's rewarding.'

Dedicated to a fault, Norris regularly goes above and beyond. She tells me about Jake, who missed three separate appointments with her. 'He was living in a hostel in Soho, so I went there,' she recalls. 'He wouldn't come down, so I waited until he got fed up and then he *had* to come down and talk to me. From that moment it turned around. But it would have been so easy to give up.'

'You *have* to go to that extra length. They're nervous. They're terrified. They don't know what to expect and they're alienated from authority.'

The only downside is that Norris, who has two teenage daughters, is stretched and needs more funding. 'It's quite difficult for me to get a work/life balance. I need a bigger team so that we can help even more youngsters - 10,000 young people leave care each year and we want to be there for all of them.'

'Before I did this work, I could be strangely shy. But I find myself doing things for these youngsters that I would never do for myself. I've found this huge energy and ability to just go up and say, "Help!" - and I'm not embarrassed by it. I'm fearless.'



JASMINE JOBSON, 19 PLAYS MARIE

The second Jobson bursts into the rehearsal space, you can't help but take notice. Keeping her shades on, she talks proudly about her pup, Tyson, only to burst into a flawless rendition of Alicia Keys' *Fallin'* straight after; a heady mix of talent and attitude. Jobson was the first care leaver to join The Big House, >>

in 2012, and now works professionally, auditioning for *Star Wars* and getting down to the last two for another Hollywood film. 'From where I come, the kind of experiences I've been through, the troubles in my life and the challenges I've had to overcome, there aren't doors open for people like me,' she says. 'Now Maggie has endorsed people in the system, we're all living proof that it can happen.'

After a drug raid at her mother's home when she was 11, Jobson lived with her grandmother before putting herself into care at 14. She was dubbed 'the worst-behaved child in Westminster'.

'I didn't care about myself. I was selling drugs, I was fighting. You name it, I've done it. I'm not proud of it. Never in my life would I go back there.'

She credits her foster carer Valerie, and Maggie, for turning her life around. 'I've probably been the luckiest person in care,' she says. 'Valerie helped me become a better person and Maggie has helped me get the career I've always dreamed of. At *The Big House* there is no such thing as "I can't". It's: "You can, you will and you must."



DYMOND ALLEN, 35
PLAYS LEROY

'Yeah, I'm totally the shy, retiring type,' Allen laughs, as he flexes his muscles, deliberately having visited the gym to pump up before our shoot. One of the older members of the cast, Allen has known Maggie for six years. 'If she set up a road-sweeping company, I would be a road sweeper,' he says.

Without a doubt, Allen is one of the friendliest people you could meet. At university studying health and social care management, he mentors young people in his spare time. But things weren't always that way. Adopted at six months old, the adoption was abusive and broke down when he was eight. He went back into care and was fostered at 11, but was back on his own by 15.

'I've been to jail, been a gangster, sold crack, was a crack addict, been in bare-knuckle street fights for money,' he says. 'The birth of my first daughter when I was 20 sparked the start of a change. It didn't happen overnight, but it started something.'

'But when I left care at 15, if I'd had something like *The Big House* to support me, I may not have done some of the things I did. It's important for people to know they belong somewhere - to feel that family unit - especially coming from care.'

'Maggie needs knighting,' he smiles before racing off to be a mentor himself. 'For what she does, she needs knighting. Straight up. We are all her children. And she's Mummy Mags.'



VERONIQUE ANDRE, 24
PLAYS SHANICE

While the others compare notes, check their phones and sporadically burst into song, Andre, the lead in the show, sits quietly on the sidelines, observing the chaos with a nervous smile. Later she confesses she hasn't yet shared her story with the others - she was taken into care for six months at 15 after a domestic incident with her mother and stepfather.

'I went to school the next morning and that's when they saw the bruises on me and took action,' she says. 'It happened really quickly. One minute I'm here and the next taken out of school and I'm far away where I don't know anyone.'

After six months, Andre temporarily moved in with her biological father but as he was suffering from depression, she moved back in with her mum in

north London. 'Yeah, he had his own battles,' she says. He sadly passed away four years ago from ARVD (a sudden cardiac arrest) at the age of 47. 'He actually lived longer than expected,' she says quietly. Andre found her friends were little support and became even more isolated when she moved back to her mum's.

**'I'M NOT SHY
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THIS IS WHERE
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After leaving school, she drifted from beauty therapy to childcare and back, but always returned to the arts. Introduced to *The Big House* by a former boyfriend, she quickly fell in love with

Maggie - but the effort of sharing herself is still, at times, too much.

'I'm shy, I know that,' she says. 'But not when I perform. That's when my confidence comes out. This is where I belong.'

*For more information on the productions, how to support *The Big House* or become a mentor, visit thebighouse.uk.com*

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LINDSEY POOLE. PROP STYLING: LAURA TIMMENS