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Basement theatres: Take a look inside Cardiff's brand-new fringe theatre

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The grand opening of Porter's basement performance space gives Cardiff its first fringe theatre, and here is why you should visit.

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A walk down the dark, dimly lit Barrack Lane in Central Cardiff may give you the impression of a ghost town, but step into Porter's pub and it opens a window to glitzy shows, flamboyantly dressed actors and drag performances.

The city's first fringe theatre opened here this week, and in just a few days, it has turned into a quirky and cosy hotspot for Welsh theatre groups and performers, something the larger venues like the Wales Millennium Centre do not offer.

Frankie Taylor, part of Porter's theatre team and running the theatre alongside Alice Rush and Dan Porter said, "Our programme is a little bit of everything – from new writing, to drag, to puppetry, to burlesque to a real life Tellytubby. However, we are particularly keen to platform the sort of work you don't get to see anywhere else in Cardiff. We love art that accepts fringe theatre as its own artform, not just a stepping stone to something bigger."

This bar prides itself on inclusivity, filling three different rooms with a welcoming and fun-filled atmosphere, all whilst celebrating Cardiff's creatives. Providing a space for performers ranging from singers to actors, and all the way to cabaret and drag duos, this venue is oozing at the seams with local talent.

The new theatre space has been described as a fringe theatre, providing 60 seats for viewing. The word fringe is derived from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, attracting performances otherwise categorised as 'unconventional' or outside the realm of 'mainstream theatre'.

The performing arts, however, aren't as glamorous as they may seem. The decline in government funding for the arts is taking a toll on creatives, providing them with less opportunities and less financial support. This, unfortunately, means that creatives flock to London to seek opportunities; leaving smaller cities baron of talent.

Performers believe smaller and more accessible venues like Porter's fringe theatre will encourage artists to pursue their careers locally and it is important to recognise the value of theatre in society. Despite the lack of funding, there is not a lack of interest.

Frankie said, "Theatre has been a way we communicate and form community since ancient times, and it's not going anywhere. However, the industry is on its knees, and we need serious support and investment to keep creating work that is accessible to everyone. Equally, cutting courses and making it harder for young people to study theatre just ensures theatre is a hobby for the rich and keeps the rest of us out."

According to Campaign For The Arts, between 2010 and 2023 the local government revenue funding of culture and related services decreased by 29% in Scotland, 40% in Wales and 48% in England, leaving the arts in tatters across the UK.

Polly and Esther, a joyfully chaotic blend of cabaret and drag, are currently performing on Porter's new stage. The show summarises Porter's values in a nutshell, celebrating self-expression, unconventional family, and a friendship worth fighting for, all while navigating an evil low-fat yoghurt-based probiotic gut health brand.

The duo debuted their high-camp cabaret at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last year. Written and performed by Welsh-born Polly Amorous and Esther Parade, the show has been programmed by Alice Rush and Frankie Taylor to retell the original story but with Porter's hat on.

This is a prime example of what Porter's new theatre has been designed to accommodate.

Frankie Taylor said, "Theatre-wise, you can see renowned musicals at the Wales Millennium Centre, or mid-scale new writing at the Sherman. But there is nowhere to see a brand-new show in its first iteration, or anything outside of the traditional confines of what we think theatre is. Without this, how do we keep making better art and bring new and diverse people into the industry?"

Drag has become increasingly more popular and visible in recent years, following the rise of RuPaul's Drag Race. However, drag is so much more than just a trend. The first person to identify as a 'Queen of Drag' was during the 1880's, beginning a more diverse and inclusive community.

Polly and Esther honours the history of drag with its comic and sassy ode to self-certification. The show not only celebrates the wider global drag community but also contributes to the scene in South Wales, something that it is renowned for. Consequently, it attracts a highly anticipating audience.

“There is a big drag scene in Cardiff, despite the city being so small,” said Esther Parade. “The theatre and our show have been supported mostly by the Arts Council, which we are so grateful for. We appreciate any support we can get because shows are crazy expensive, and there is a lack of funding. Tell your friends about us and bring your friends who weren’t able to come tonight.”

Artists hope by embracing the fringe, championing local talent, and providing a platform for diverse voices, the new theatre will not only entertain but also enrich the community and keep the spirit of theatre alive in the city.