

Rick Finlay plays his kit at the Phoenix in *Blood Brothers*

INTERVIEW

Drum break



Rick's advice for breaking into musical theatre...

- Don't get too fixated with this one part of the business: "You have to be hungry to do all sorts of things and work in musical theatre might be part of that mix."
- Keep learning. *After Little Shop of Horrors*, Rick realised there were gaps in his musical education and took private lessons with drum tutor Bob Armstrong.
- Find out about working in the West End from musicians who already work there.
- Work on interpersonal skills. "That's not just getting on with your colleagues and musicians, but also the people who employ you and manage you."
- If you are lucky enough to get a regular theatre gig, do other work to stop yourself getting stale.
- While the audience isn't at a show to hear clever improvisation, "The same cardinal principles of listening, finding the groove and making the music work as a whole still apply."

West End Life

Rick Finlay, long-time drummer on *Blood Brothers*, shares his experiences of working on West End shows

When the curtain rises on *Blood Brothers* at the Phoenix Theatre on Charing Cross Road, chances are it will be Rick Finlay sitting behind the drum kit in the band. Providing the backbeat for Willy Russell's long-running tale of separated twins is a prestigious gig, a gig to get you noticed by fellow professionals, and it's a testament to Rick Finlay's ability that he has been playing in the show since 1990.

"I thought I'd do the job for a few months and clear the debt on the credit cards," he laughs. "It turned out, fortunately, to be one of those shows that's just run and run, so I've been in steady work for a long time."

Sixteen years to be precise, but Rick didn't simply swan straight into such a high-profile show. Rather, his career in musical theatre began when he worked on *Polly*, a modern-dress sequel to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* with music by John Telfer. "From that, I found myself

being asked to do other theatre work, so it was really something I drifted into," says Rick, "but I enjoyed it and obviously other people liked what I did."

By 1982, Rick was sufficiently established to be offered his first West End job, in that most wonderfully unlikely tale of a homicidal plant, *Little Shop Of Horrors*. It was his first introduction both to "really serious work as a professional musician" and the excitement of working full-time in the capital.

"I love working in London," he says. "It's where I grew up and I think it's a very buzzy city to work in. One of the things that happens in the West End is that there is quite a community of musicians working in town, and when the show closes, people meet up in the jazz clubs or the pubs and it's a nice social scene."

"There are a lot of people involved in musical theatre who are still extremely motivated about music and being creative in that world, and that keeps you fired up," Rick enthuses.

"There are lots of people in musical theatre who keep you fired up"

RICK FINLAY'S CV

Rick is currently drummer for *Blood Brothers* at the Phoenix Theatre, Charing Cross Road (www.theambassadors.com/phoenix). He also has his own band, *Just East of Jazz*. For more details, including tour dates, visit www.justeastofjazz.co.uk

MUSICAL THEATRE: *Blood Brothers*, *Night Club Confidential*, *Chess*, *Little Shop Of Horrors*, *Three Guys Naked From The Waist Down*, *Babes In Arms*, *Lyle*

TEACHING: Middlesex University, Trinity College of Music, private practice, various independent schools

JUST EAST OF JAZZ CDS: *Just East of Jazz* (1996), *Swerve* (1998), *Feast* (2002), *More Than Four* (2005), all available from www.jazzcds.co.uk

MU ACTIVITIES, ALL VOLUNTARY: Band Steward at *Blood Brothers*, Roving Safety Rep, Executive Committee, London Regional Committee, Theatre Section Committee, Health & Safety Working Group

For those who want a flavour of this community, the MU runs monthly get-togethers for West End players. "That is partly a way for us to share information about what's going on in town, but I think it would also be a great opportunity for aspiring players to come and meet some of the people who are doing it, introduce themselves to that culture," suggests Rick.

But while fellow musicians may be an inspiration, the risk of getting stale playing the same music night after night is inevitably a danger. For Rick, the key lies in having other projects on the go as well. Not only does he teach on an undergraduate jazz course at Middlesex University, but he has his own band, *Just East of Jazz*. He does occasional sessions, works extensively for the MU (including serving on the Executive Committee) and, as father of a young son, somehow finds time to help out with childcare chores. "It's a full week, a very full week," he says, "but it's that mix that keeps me enthused about music."

But even playing the same music night after night, there are still genuinely unexpected moments. "Our percussionist Tony Wagstaff's mark tree – a collection of hanging chimes – collapsed during the show," says Rick, "and each chime took about 30 seconds to roll off the bandstand onto the stage. By the time the 20th chime had dropped, the actors had given up on dialogue, and the sound effect got its own ovation."