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gig bites

At the time of writing, the Shed's tenth anniversary season is yet to be finalised; but here are the highlights of the highlights.

There's the return of Andy White, the Switzerland-based, Belfast balladeer who will be making his third visit to the Shed on September 28.

White has worked with the likes of Billy

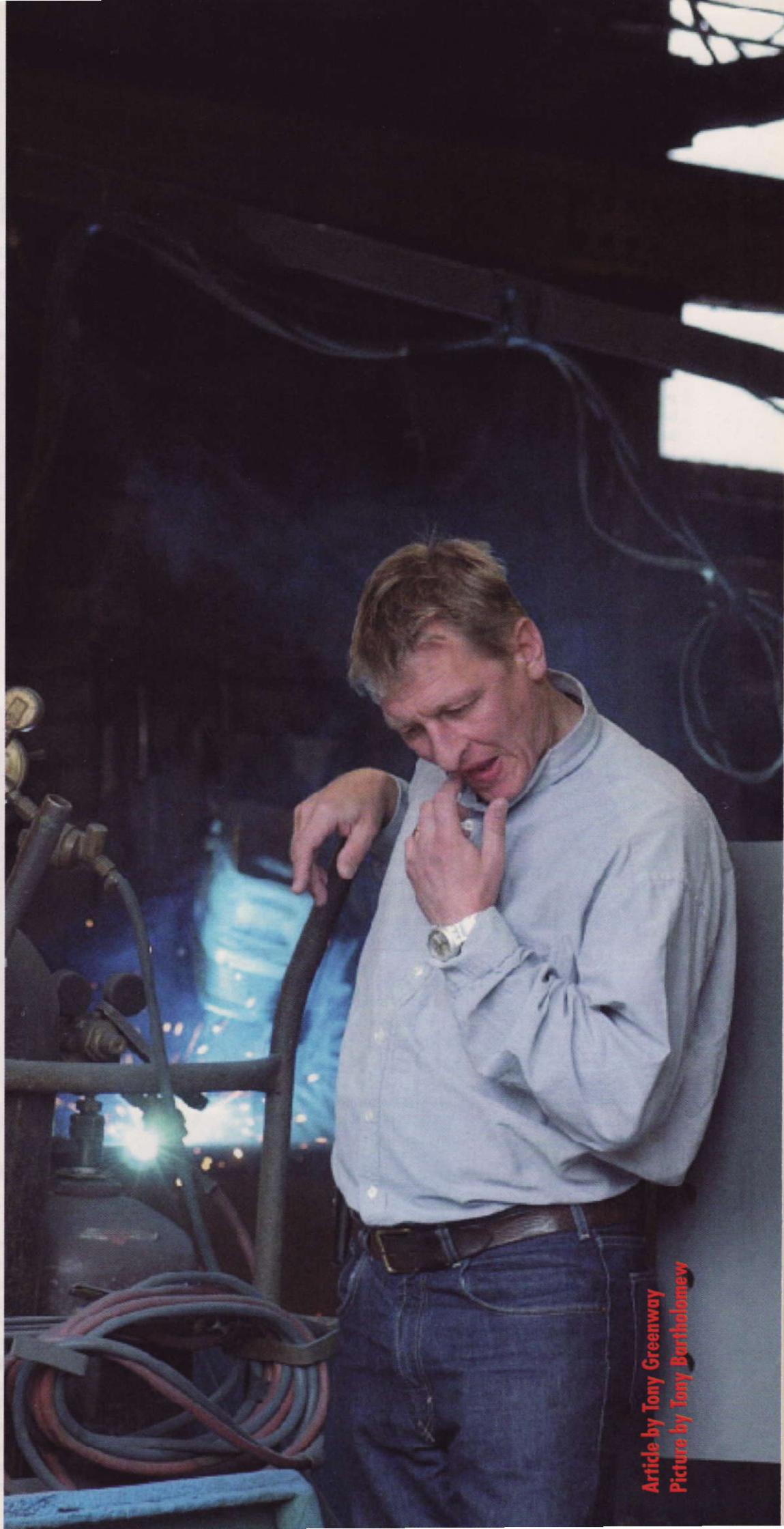
Bragg, Tim Finn and Sinead O'Connor, and is - according to Simon Thackray - "very Van Morrison-esque."

On October 11, the wild and woolly Shed masterpiece that is 'Nat' travels to London's Union Chapel, Islington; while, back in Brawby, 'Trimming Pablo' by Dave Sheasby (the true-story of Picasso's day out in Sheffield in November 1950) stars Fine Time Fontayne.

On Saturday 26 October, Billy Jenkins turns up with his Blues Collective; and on November 5, Japan's Satoko Fujii kicks off a mini series of concerts showcasing contemporary pianists. Hank Wangford - yes, ha-ha, no Spoonerisms please - returns again to the Shed on 14 December; and he's got his Lost Cowboys in tow.

All in all, quite a posse.

Details on 01653-668494 or via www.theshed.co.uk



Article by Tony Greenway
Picture by Tony Bartholomew

Simon Thackray

The Shed is ten years old. You know, the place in North Yorks that puts on big names in a small rural venue? Only, we didn't say that, right?

We never saw the punchline coming. We were travelling sedately down one of Simon Thackray's long anecdotal roads – full of droll side-streets and comical chicanes – when the ending jumped out at us. And, before we knew what had happened, we'd hit it.

It stunned us into amused silence.

"I don't know why I told you that," says Thackray, afterwards.

We're not sure, either. But we're glad he did: it started a good 20 minutes ago and concerned an episode in the early days of his legendary Brawby-based arts venue, the Shed (aka Brawby Village Hall). We'll *precis* it for you...

Hours before a gig featuring the sound poet Bob Cobbing, Thackray was moping around outside the Shed, dragging on a consolatory cigarette after selling just a handful of tickets.

A Lycra-clad cyclist had whizzed past and Thackray – always one to make the most of a golden opportunity – flagged him down and promised him free admission in a desperate attempt to make up punter numbers. And bugger me, says Thackray, this bloke only turned up at the gig and sat at the back with his Lycra shorts on and his cycling-helmet down beside.

Afterwards, while applause was still falling on Bob Cobbing like rainspots, Lycra Man jumped up on stage, pulled a harmonica out of his pocket and said: "I hope you don't mind, but this is my party piece," and proceeded to play 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. "That evening," says Thackray, "ended with all 15 people singing along. It was perfect. To this day, everyone thinks I knew this guy and that it was a set-up. But I'd never seen him before in my life. Unbelievable. Un-bee-lee-ver-bull."

Things like that only happen in Frank Capra movies. Except they also happen to Simon Thackray. It's what makes the Shed – with its

70-seater capacity and its international reputation – so unique. But Thackray pauses, crumples his eyebrows and forgets his point "That one went up a dead end, didn't it?"

Thackray might be an impresario. Then again, he might be an artist (he also sculpts, paints and exhibits). Or an entrepreneur. It takes keen business nous AND a keen artistic sense to create something as lunatic as the annual Yorkshire Pudding Boat Race (on Brawby Pond, next door to the Shed) with the help of Ian McMillan, Kubryk Townsend, Billy Jenkins and sax bloke Snake Davis. Then there's 'Hat', the song, story and poetry show conceived by Thackray, where the audience is invited to knit during the performance.

So what does Simon call himself? There is a long pause. "In my head, I am an artist/promoter. But I'm a promoter of IDEAS. No, more than that. I'm an enthusiast. I'm a storyteller. I don't invent stories and I'm not a creative genius with words; but I have a passion to communicate the idea to the audience. I want to tell them the story – and I don't necessarily want them to give me 10 quid for it, either."

Weirdy wonders like the Boat Race, he insists, are "art" – and 'the idea' is the only motivation for their creation. But then, once Thackray has conceived something, he is able to switch to a different mode. "There might be a commercial aspect to it; so I put my promoter's hat back on."

The Shed was 10 years old in June, and has a reputation in the broadsheets as an out-of-the-way, rural arts venue (which it is) that manages to pull in big, splashy names (which it does). Labi Siffre, Tom Robinson, Hank Wangford, John Otway and the Stranglers' Hugh Cornwell have all gone out of their (and pretty much everyone else's) way to play at the Shed. But the 'Celebrities Go to Smallville' headline obviously now gets Thackray's goat, big style. "I hate the concept of 'the name' in 'the small, rural venue'. To hell with that. I'm not interested in it." End of story.

What Thackray IS interested in are "high calibre, innovative and exciting" artists. It could be Hank Wangford. It could be a group of Inuit throat singers. You may never have heard of some of the acts at the Shed, says Thackray, but if you were in the audience when that Scandinavian film-maker showed videos on her telly and talked about them in Finnish, you'd have thought she was sensational. Sen-say-shan-all.

Thackray is very specific about what's 'classy'. Two years ago, for instance, he booked (hugely tolerant) jazzier and cello bow-maker Pete Oxley, on the condition that he change the name of his band. "I told him: 'Pete, I think you're great. But I'm not booking a band called 'Manray'. I can't put that in my programme.' So we renamed it. There's 'naff' and 'pure naff'. 'Pure naff' – real, classy naff – I would go with. 'Mrs Boyes Bingo' (a show featuring a lady from

Malton who calls out bingo numbers) is, ostensibly, a naff thing to do; but it's top-class naff, and my God is it brilliant. But just 'naff'? No. Can't do it."

Not all of Thackray's ideas have been winners. The show with the audience listening to poets on the other end of mobile telephones sold just two tickets, and was duly pulled. "The 'Independent' wanted to come and review it," says Thackray. "I told them: 'Sorry. It's been put on hold.' And I enjoyed saying that."

Before he founded the Shed, Thackray used to make them. Sheds, that is. Big steel ones. "The business has been in my family for 200 years. My father was involved and my brother still is. I left it, sold out... and went into MY shed." The one in his garden; a studio/workshop where he made sculptures from stone and wood and welded metal.

He had no plans to start an arts venue. None. He did, though, want to run a couple of charity concerts, and tried to book Labe Siffre for them.

He couldn't get him, but did land a Gambian Kora player for a gig at Kirby Misperton church in June 1992. The next month he booked a string quartet from the Hallé; and he continued to pester Labi Siffre who ultimately relented and played a set at Brawby Village Hall under three clip-on domestic spotlights which Thackray bought from the local electrical shop.

Someone suggested that Thackray plonk his shed door on stage, too. So he did. And now the door has become his beast of burden, and the Shed's reputation has grown organically.

Thackray wants to keep the essence of the Shed intact, but he is not without ambition. Brawby Village Hall has done him proud for a decade, but he wants a bigger space for the audience, for the artists and for himself. "I am bored with it," he sighs. "I want to be able to bring a pianist to the piano. I don't want the ball-ache of hiring a grand piano from Manchester or Leeds. I don't want artists to get changed in the toilet – which is what they've had to do for the past 10 years. It's disrespectful, ultimately. Billy Jenkins said to me the other day: 'You're coming up to 11. It's time to move out of short trousers.'" It's part of the organic process to move onwards and upwards. "Now I need..." and he mouths it like a dirty word at a church fête, "...money. What I'm saying is: 'I've got the object; I just want to put it inside a bigger box.'"

This doesn't mean leaving Brawby. He'll simply "go over the road" where he has a plot for a new venue all marked out.

When will this happen? Yes. Good question.

So what is it like running the Shed, Simon Thackray? "Hmmm. Dr Donald English – leader of the world's Methodists – once described the way to hold a golf club. He said you should hold it like a bird in your hand; tight enough so it can fly away, but not so tight that you might kill it.

"That's what it's like. Occasionally it flies out of your hand. And occasionally it shits on your head."