Ensemble ’84 Is Reimagining Theatre in County Durham

Wednesday 27 May, 2026

In Horden, a former mining village on the County Durham coast, a building once left standing empty is now full of life again. This month, local residents, performers, supporters and invited guests gathered to celebrate the official opening of The Playhouse, the new permanent home of Ensemble '84, officially opened by Sir Ian McKellen.

Inside, the audience watched Shakespeare performed in a way few expected to see in one of England’s most economically challenged communities. Sir Ian delivered excerpts from Shakespeare, and Ensemble ’84 performed scenes from a rarely staged version of Hamlet.

There was laughter, applause and long-standing ovations. But the event was about far more than one famous guest or one opening night.

For those involved, it marked another step in a much bigger project. One rooted in the belief that world-class theatre should not only belong to major cities, wealthy audiences, or people with industry connections.

Ensemble ’84 was founded in 2024 with a simple but ambitious idea: open up access to theatre and culture. Root it in place. Build it with the people who live there.

Based in Horden, the company offers paid training and professional opportunities to local people, many of whom have no previous route into theatre. In less than two years, it has become one of the most talked-about cultural projects in the North East of England.

The opening of The Playhouse, formerly Our Lady, Star of the Sea Roman Catholic Church, which was purchased at auction, now gives the company a permanent base in the village. A home for productions, training, workshops and community activity. It also sends a message about long-term investment in a place that is more often discussed through statistics than through culture.

Horden’s story is well known across the North East. Built around coal mining, the village once revolved around Horden Colliery, one of the largest pits in the country. When the pit closed in 1987, thousands of jobs disappeared almost overnight. The effects of that loss are still felt today through poverty, poor health outcomes and limited opportunities. Yet those involved with Ensemble ’84 are keen to challenge the way places like Horden are viewed.

“There’s a tendency to see communities like this only through deprivation,” says Executive Producer Sud Basu. “But there is pride here. Talent. Resilience. Stories worth telling. Culture should not be parachuted into communities. It should grow from within them.”

That approach runs through every aspect of the company’s work. Its first production, Mother Courage and Her Children, adapted by playwright Lee Hall, brought together local performers from County Durham with artists from South Africa’s internationally renowned Isango Ensemble. The production received strong reviews, sold-out performances and national attention. It was later transferred to Newcastle’s Live Theatre, proving the work could connect far beyond the village itself.

The company followed it with Pits, People and Players, a production built directly from local stories about mining, identity and community life in Horden. Audience demand has already led to a second run in June.

Now Ensemble ’84 is preparing for perhaps its boldest artistic challenge yet. From 28 May, the company will stage The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet – Shakespeare’s First Quarto, a rarely performed early version of Hamlet which differs significantly from the better-known text.

For director Mark Dornford-May, artistic rigour is central to the company’s vision. “There is no reason why challenging or ambitious work should only happen in London or at major institutions,” he says. “People here are capable of extraordinary things if they are given the opportunity.”

Dornford-May is no stranger to creating theatre in overlooked places. The multi-award-winning director founded Isango Ensemble in South Africa in 2000 and has built an international reputation for creating large-scale work with local performers. His productions have won Olivier Awards, major international honours and critical acclaim worldwide.

Media:







Related Sectors:

Charities & non-profits :: Entertainment & Arts ::

Related Keywords:

Theatre :: Hamlet :: Shakespeare :: Countydurham :: Northeast :: Literature :: Performance :: Performing Arts :: Durham :: Culture :: Art :: Heritage :: Eastdurham ::

Scan Me:

Alongside directing, he has repeatedly helped create theatre spaces from the ground up. In London, he was part of the campaign that helped bring Wilton's Music Hall back into use during the 1990s. In South Africa, he established a permanent home for Isango Ensemble , focused on training, performance, and community engagement. That same long-term approach is now shaping Horden. Already, Ensemble '84 has become one of the village's largest employers.

Its trainees and performers come from across County Durham. Some are appearing on stage professionally for the first time. Others joined the company through earlier productions and training programmes.

Among the current cast are performers from across County Durham, from former pit villages on the east coast to rural towns near the Pennines, as well as a strong East Durham contingent. Three new ensemble members from the company's second intake will make their stage debut in Hamlet.

Company Contact: