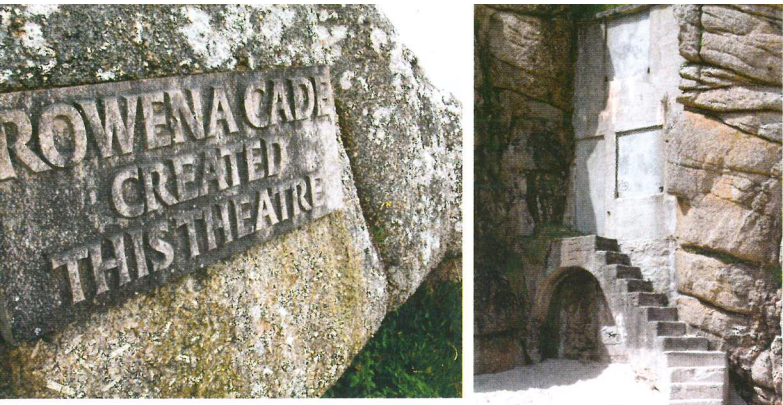




Rowena Cade not only built the theatre, but also a beach retreat in the cliffs for her young relatives.



Rowena at work decorating the hand-built arches of the Minack's dressing rooms.

HIGH ABOVE THE sands of Porthcurno Beach in the wild west of Cornwall, a steady stream of theatre-goers inch carefully past one another to find a seat on the grassy tiered terrace. They organise their cushions and blankets, open their picnic baskets and marvel at the turquoise waters of the dramatic Atlantic seascape. Below them, the waves crash against the cliffs, and in the distance, the Lizard lighthouse blinks into life. Excited chatter fills the air. Then, from among the shadows, comes an actress, quick footsteps running onto

the stage. She is a young girl, with loose brown hair, captivating the audience instantly with her movements and grace. She is impervious to the red-sailed Cornish shrimper gliding across the ocean behind her, or the seagulls soaring in the winds above. She lifts her head and addresses the crowd. The performance has begun.

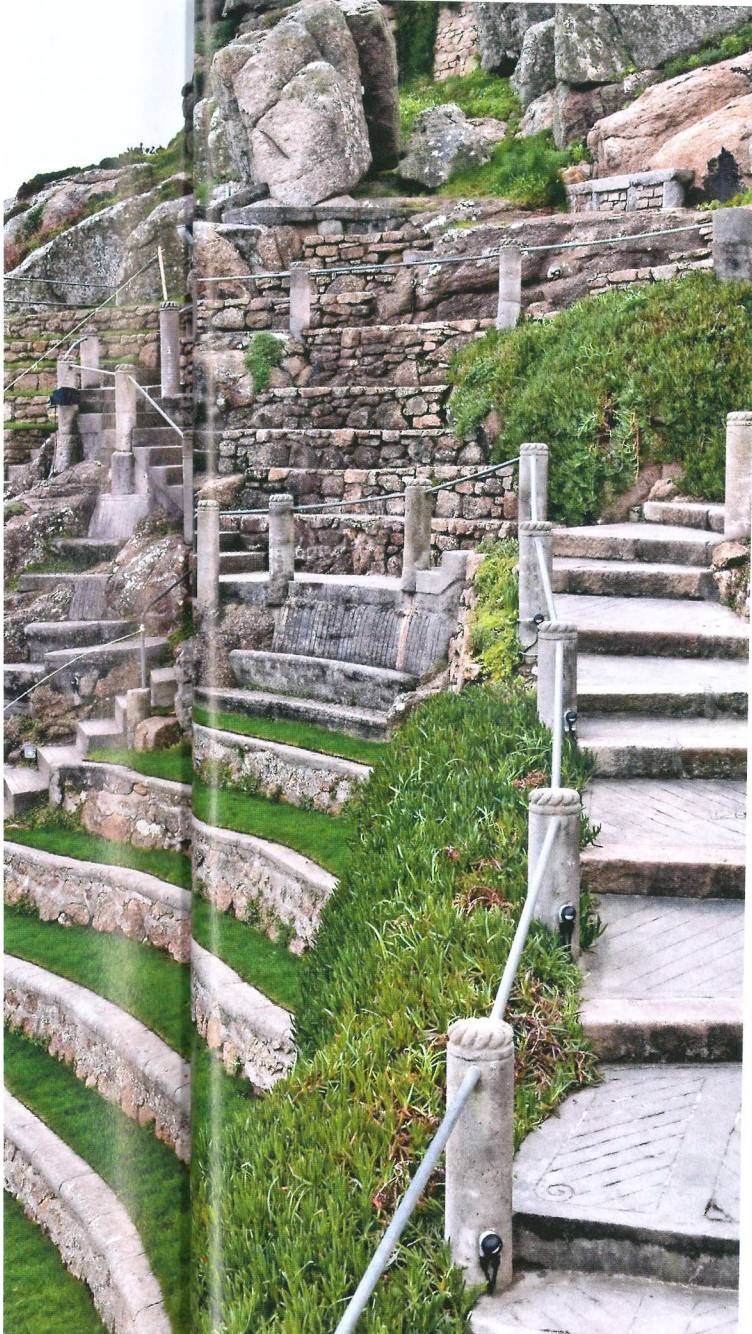
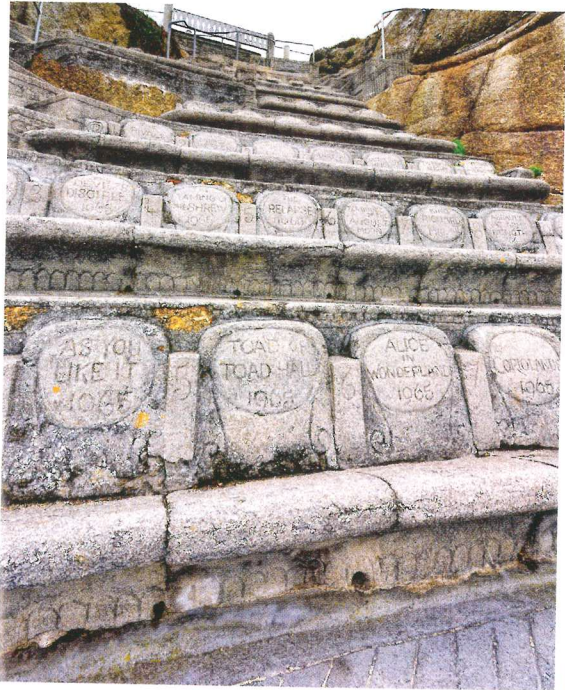
This is Minack, Cornwall's famous open-air theatre-in-the-round. It may look as if it was left by the Romans after they departed in the fifth century, but this magical place exists because of the determination of one remarkable woman, Rowena Cade. From its humble beginnings staging its first production, *The Tempest*, in the summer of 1932, the Minack has grown into a busy theatre, with approximately 100,000 people visiting annually to watch its productions and more than 200,000 daytime visitors.

Today, the Minack is run by a charitable trust set up by Miss Cade in 1976. It seats more than 700 people and plays host to a mixture of amateur and professional theatre companies from all over the UK, with the main season running from Easter to the end of September. In addition to the theatre, there is a cliffside botanical garden filled with rare sub-tropical plants from all over the world. There is also a café and a gift shop as well as an exhibition centre, where visitors can learn more about Rowena Cade and how she came to build her spectacular theatre.

Built by hand

The daughter of a cotton mill owner, Rowena was born in Derby in 1893. In 1906, the Cade family moved to Cheltenham, and then, after the First World War, Rowena moved to ➤

Carved on the back of the concrete seats are the names of plays and performances staged at the theatre.



Some of the staggered seating comprises grass-covered steps to provide some comfort on the rocky ledges.



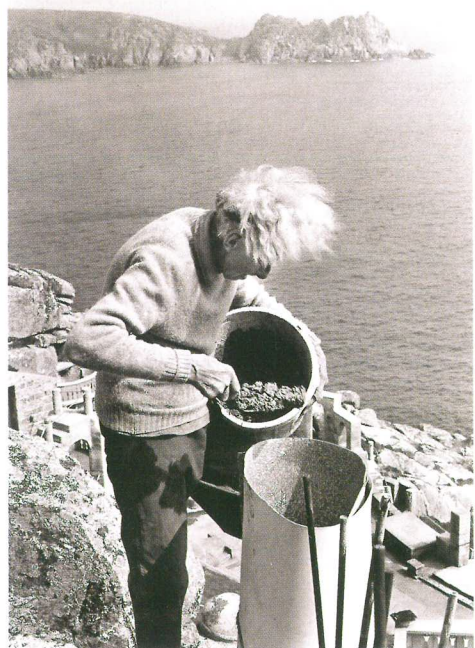
Pastel mosaic slabs form the stage, with arched views to the sea and decorative marks in the stonework and steps.

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts"

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*



July's azure waters and the pale gold sands of stunning Porthcurno Beach stretch beyond the rugged location of the theatre.



CREATING COLUMNS

The techniques which Rowena employed are still in use today. The 'stone' pillars which line the steps are cast using a flexible, tubular-shaped form, into which concrete is poured. At just the right moment, the flexible mould is removed. Then, the pillar is carved and decorated by hand.

This pill box, built by the Green Howards infantry regiment, was repurposed as a box office for the theatre.

players agreed. Over the winter and spring of 1931-32, Rowena and her gardener, Billy Rawlings, moved mountains of earth and granite boulders to build a rudimentary stage and some basic seating. The performance, in August, was lit by battery-powered car headlights and the moon over the sea.

A unique theatre had been born, and Rowena and Billy continued to expand and improve it. The theatre may appear to have been carved into the granite, but, in fact, almost all of it is made of cement mixed with local beach sand. On a meagre budget, the ever-resourceful Rowena would carry bags of sand up from Porthcurno Beach to mix into the cement. Before the concrete hardened, she would decorate the cement with the names of plays, performances and Celtic designs.

From pillbox to box office

The Tempest production earned a mention in *The Times*, and performances continued every summer. But before its new-found popularity could be realised, the Second World War broke out. The Minack was in a prime location for mounted sea defences in case of German invasion, and the land was seized. Actors and stage props were replaced by entanglements of barbed wire. A pillbox guard post was erected and manned constantly.

Once the war was over, the theatre was in ruins. Forced neglect had rendered it

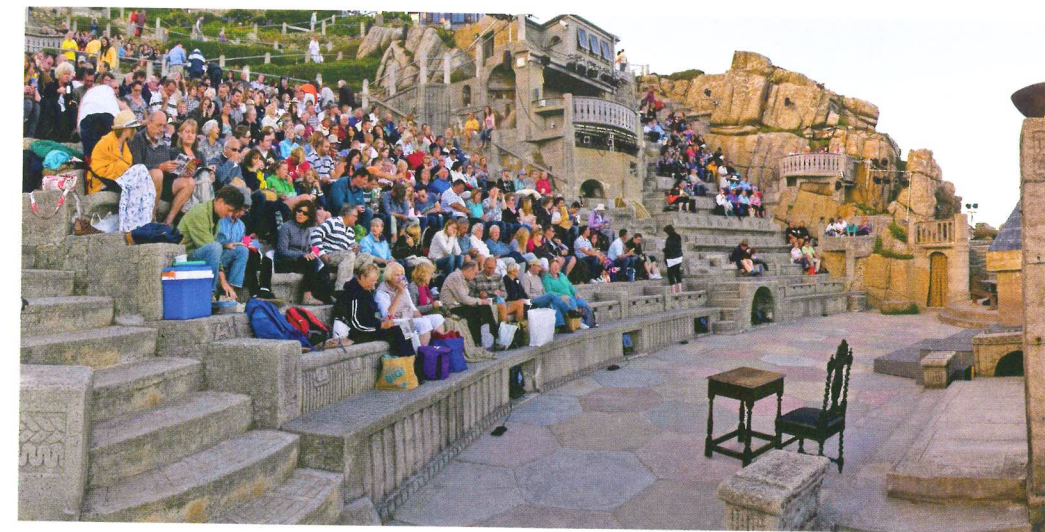
Cornwall with her widowed mother. She bought the headland at Minack, from 'meynek', meaning 'rocky place' in Cornish, for £100. There, she built a house for herself and her mother using granite from a quarry in nearby St Levan.

In such a remote location, entertainment was 'home-made,' and Rowena became involved with a local theatre group. Throughout the 1920s, her house and garden provided the setting for several amateur productions. In 1929, a more ambitious project was organised. A mile or so inland, in a bucolic meadow, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was to be staged. Rowena did not have a speaking part and, instead, immersed herself with all the goings-on backstage, including decorating and sewing costumes.

However, when it came to staging another of Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest*, the theatre group decided that a more dramatic setting was required. Rowena proposed using the rugged setting of the gully overlooking the ocean. The



Waves crashing on the rocks at the foot of the theatre add to the unique atmosphere and setting for performances.



Seats fill up for an evening performance under the skies, with blankets and picnic boxes at the ready.

almost unrecognisable. Undaunted, Rowena and Billy set about restoring it. When the theatre reopened with *Tristan of Cornwall* in August 1951, the pillbox had become a box office and remained so until 1998, when it was demolished to make way for a visitor centre. As the years went by, audiences grew and so did the theatre, with the addition of seats, steps, walls, arches, pillars and dressing rooms.

Unique challenges

Local actor and storyteller Mark Harandon knows the Minack well. "I first came here in 1983 to perform in Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*," he says. "It coincided with the theatre trying out a new sound system, which had to be switched off, as all it was picking up was

the noise of the wind. We performed the old way, which was to project your voice up the cliff against the noise of the waves behind." Since then, Mark has performed in several different productions at the theatre, most recently playing Billy Rawlings in his one-man show, *Moving Heaven and Earth*.

"The idea for a show based around Rawlings was instigated by the Minack, which arranged for me to meet with his daughter, who is now in her 90s," explains Mark. His research has given him a unique insight into the Minack's creation and the working relationship between Rowena and Billy. "They did get exasperated with each other. I spoke to one person, who remembers walking along the coast path as a boy and coming across two elderly people swearing away at each other as they carried out their work side by side," he chuckles. "And I've been told how Billy would hand in his notice, and Rowena would wave and say: 'See you in the morning, Billy.' He'd storm off, but the next day he'd be back, and nothing more would be said."

But there is no question that theirs was a deep and genuine friendship. When Billy died in 1966, Rowena raised him a fitting memorial: the only granite seat in the auditorium is dedicated to him. "On a still summer's evening, she'd say: 'I'm going to sit in Billy's seat now, because he'll be here on a night like this,'" says Mark.

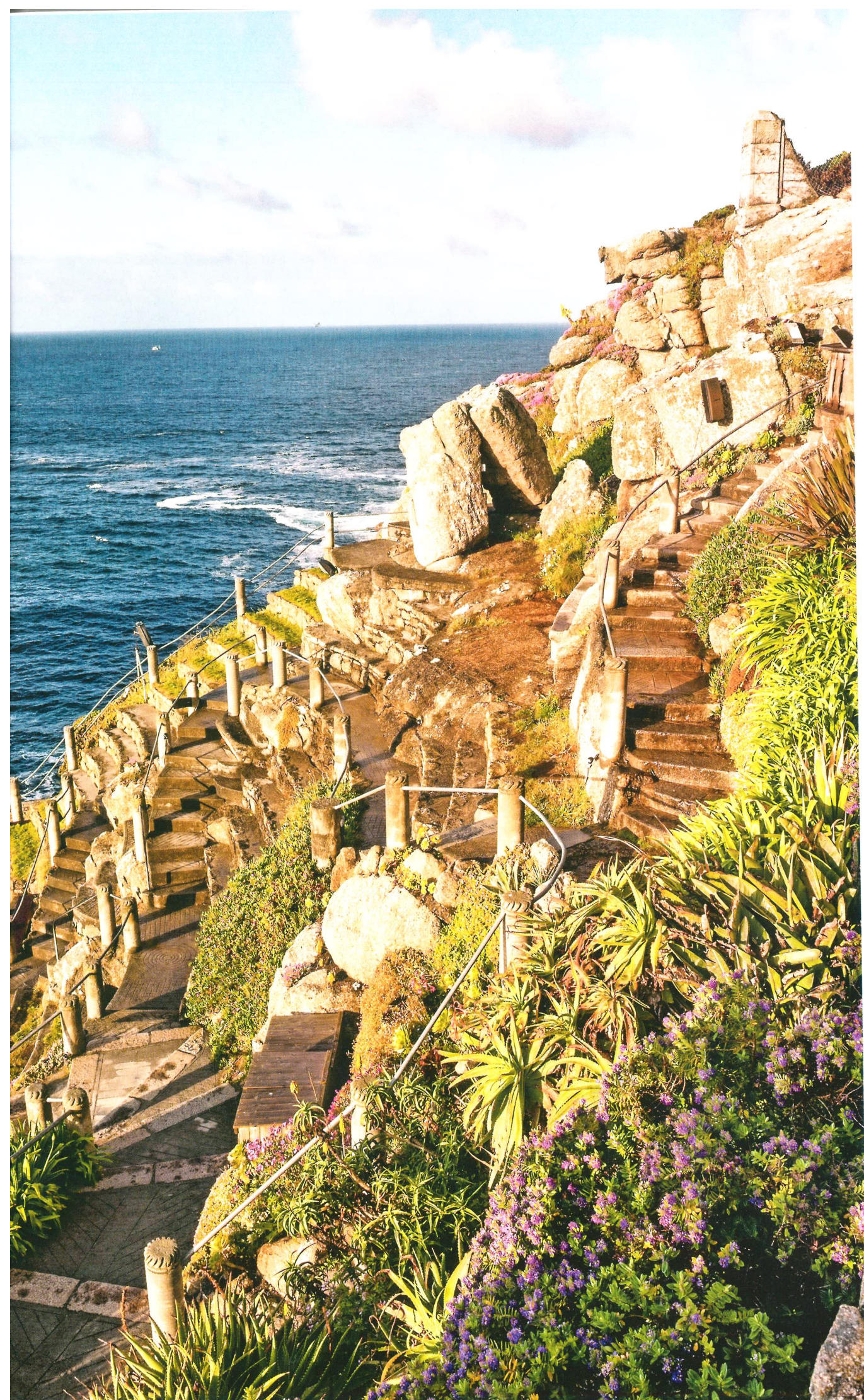
When it comes to performing at the Minack, the theatre has its own unique challenges. "You need to learn to time



Actor Mark Harandon, dressed as gardener cum builder Billy Rawlings.



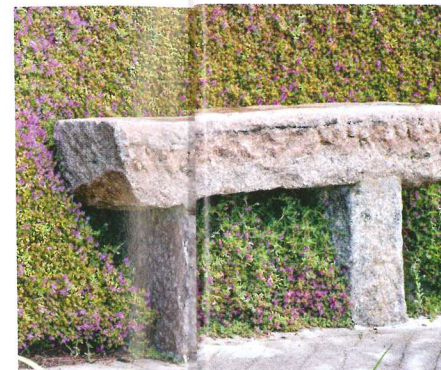
Arches create windows on the sea to provide a unique backdrop.



Cliffside steps and pathways weave between lush sub-tropical plants, plump succulents and richly coloured flowers.



The Minack's botanical gardens are full of interest, from dense shrubs to elegant cacti, (above).



A bench embedded into a hedge offers a place to sit and enjoy the views (left).



Clumps of vivid colour line steps through the terraces.



A cone-headed spear of yellow *Aeonium arboreum*, or houseleek, among the mixed beds.

CASCADE OF EXOTIC PLANTS

Most visitors start their tour of the Minack at the Rowena Cade Exhibition Centre, which stands a few feet from the car park. Rowena's story is told using audio-visual displays, models and photographs. Pictures of a young, ladylike Rowena contrast sharply with those of her in her later years: sitting in a wheelbarrow, reading, hair amok.

A maze of pathways and steps radiate out from these structures to transverse the auditorium. These walkways are bounded by an extraordinary range of plants: carpeting succulents that bear sheets of dazzling daisy blooms, fleshy-leaved aloes and agaves, blue agapanthus and shimmering silver trees, *Leucadendron argenteum*. The garden covers approximately 1½ acres and fills every cranny of the site, spilling out above the car park and approaching lane.

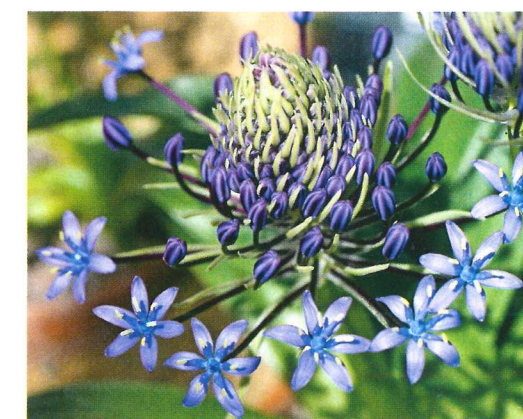
The landscaping of the garden has been achieved since 1998 by local gardeners Niall and Jill Milligan. They have transformed the cliff into a nationally acclaimed horticultural attraction, featuring succulents, cacti and other drought-tolerant species, interspersed with vivid blasts of bulbs with herbaceous perennials.

your entrances, because it can take a long time to get into the action," explains Mark. "Similarly, you need to be aware of where the sight lines are: those areas where the audience can see you, and those places where you are hidden. For example, outside the changing rooms, there's a white line which you can't cross because you'll suddenly be in sight of the audience. It is one of those theatres where the more intimately you know it, the better you can work within it."

The sound system may have vastly improved since Mark first encountered it when performing in *Jamaica Inn*, but no technology can control the natural elements. "I remember acting in a play about Oedipus, where my white hair had been dyed," he says. "As the rain came in, the hair dye started to run down my face. Every time another actor came by, they'd take their tunic and wipe my face."

"On a sunny day, you can face an audience gazing out over your head at the beautiful scenery, and you'll always know when the dolphins have arrived. All these things become a wonderful shared experience with the audience."

This uniqueness brings many people to the theatre. "A key aim of the charity is to introduce people to live theatre who might not usually attend," says theatre manager Phil Jackson. This is enabled by keeping prices low. Last year, *Candide*, Leonard Bernstein's operetta, was produced to celebrate the centenary of his birth. It had a 28-piece orchestra and a professional cast, but tickets were priced at £14. "The theatre is part-funded by the visitors, who pay an entry fee to explore and learn the Minack story. This makes us



Scilla peruviana, with its starry lilac-blue flowers.

financially self-sufficient, without the need to charge more for tickets," explains Phil.

He will rarely cancel a performance, except in extreme conditions. "We didn't cancel any last year, but the average is four or five every season." Weather changes so quickly on the coast that Phil tends to wait as long as possible before settling on a plan of action. "I'll make a decision a couple of hours beforehand," he says.

Today, a steady stream of visitors make their way down the steep steps. Some will bear left, or right, to take a seat in the upper terraces of the auditorium and simply admire the view. But, for most, the lure of the stage is irresistible. Over the last 87 years, it has played host to almost every sort of entertainment, including farce, Shakespeare, opera, musicals, drama, Gilbert and Sullivan, mime, ballet, concerts, and sound and light shows.

Flanked by towering granite rocks, the stage is approximately 65ft long by 23ft

wide (20 x 7m) and features a paved surface. Along its sea-facing side are balustrades, pillars and three arches. Off to the right, facing away from the sea, is Juliet's balcony, and beneath that stands a stone circle, with a circumference of 65ft (20m), ornamented by sculptural shadows cast from the arches. Tucked away behind the right-flanking granite outcrop, a series of steps leads up to the dressing room, which underwent a major refurbishment in 2017. It is off-limits to visitors, but according to Mark Harandon, "has the best view of any green room anywhere".

Wishes come true

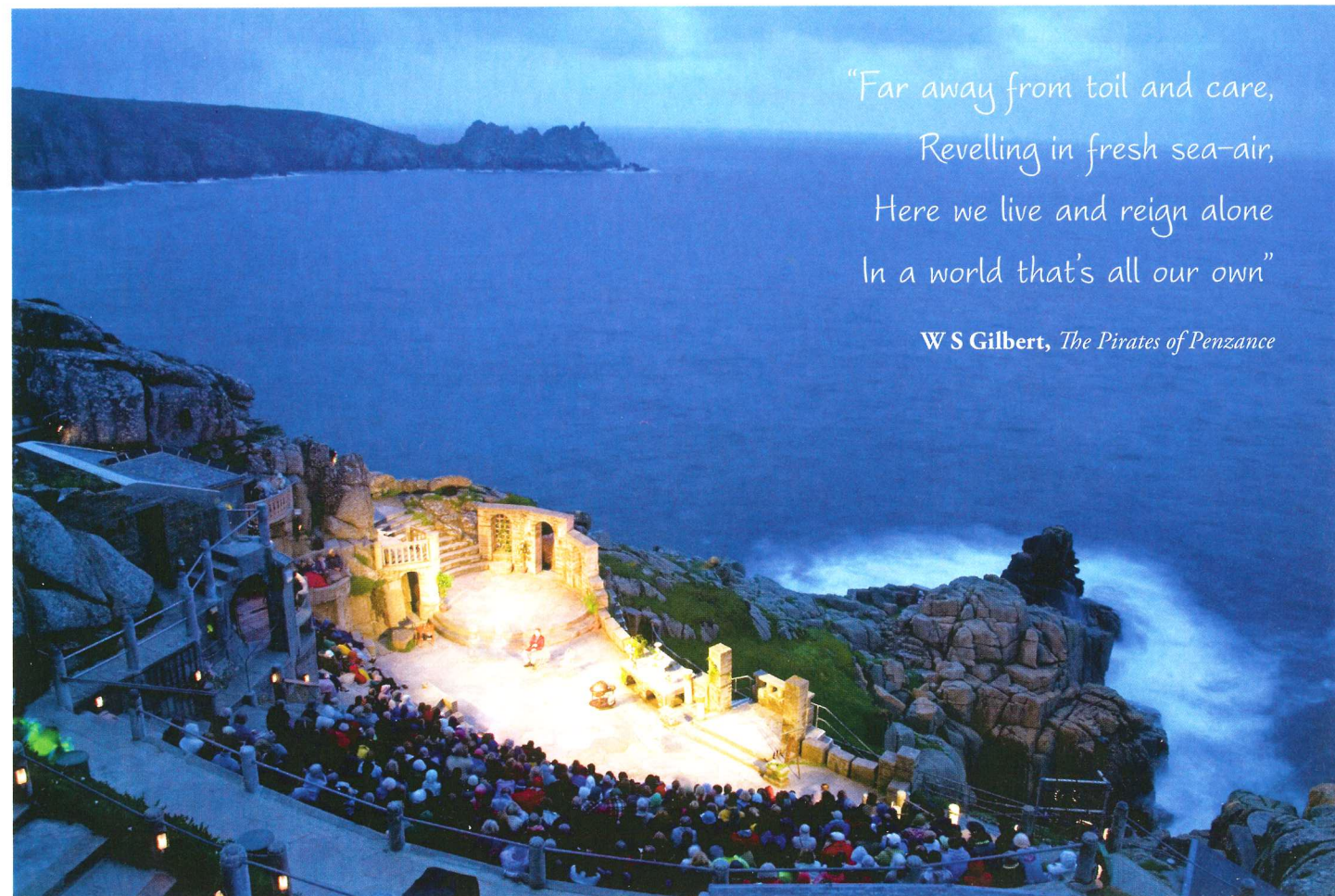
After Billy's death, Rowena took on a new builder's mate, Billy's nephew, Thomas Angove. She continued to work on her beloved theatre until she was in her mid 80s. When she died in 1983, just shy of her 90th birthday, she left sketches suggesting how the theatre might be

covered on rainy days. Even though this has yet to happen, Phil Jackson believes Rowena might be "surprised to discover that we have ticked off all the elements on the wish list she wrote on the final page of a pamphlet back in the 1960s: a better dressing room, proper toilets and café".

The aim is to continue preserving and consolidating the theatre and still be a successful operation 100 years from now. As the sunlight begins to fade over Porthcurno, and the performance begins, the mood is one of reflection. Many years ago, an extraordinary woman dreamed of building a fantastical theatre into a cliff, and through her hard work, determination and passion, that dream was realised. ■

Words: Emma Inglis

CONTACT
www.minack.com



As darkness falls and the sea laps against the shore, the stage comes to life, and the audience is spellbound.

Photography: The Minack: Emma Inglis; Alamy; Shutterstock

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