

Ugly Betty star Ashley Jensen takes the Tron a stage forward

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IT'S more than 20 years since Ashley Jensen was last on the stage of the Tron Theatre in Glasgow. Then, the Emmy-nominated Annan-born star of Extras and Ugly Betty was a young drama school graduate appearing in a series of new plays by the likes of Peter Arnott and Anne Downie.

By Neil Cooper



Ashely Jensen

Jensen has now returned to the theatre - where she began her career - as the figurehead of a new scheme to promote and ensure the future of Tron Participation, the theatre's multi-faceted outreach and education strand, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year.

In front of an invited audience last Thursday, Jensen explained the importance of Tron Participation in enabling people of all ages to discover all aspects of theatre for the first time in what can often be a life-changing experience. As Tron Participation's new Archangel, Jensen also announced the Tron Angel scheme, in which supporters of the initiative can pledge donations to ensure its survival. The Tron

Angels scheme aims to raise some £35,000 each year, and the hope is that a key 20 Tron Angels will pledge their support for the initiative over three years.

Jensen first heard about Tron Participation and the Tron Angels scheme via stage and television designer Mark Leese, who is also a member of the Tron's board of directors. Leese and Jensen were both working on *The Escape Artist*, a new TV drama in which Jensen stars opposite David Tennant, the first episode of which airs this week.

"As soon as Mark mentioned it I felt quite passionate about it," says Jensen while sitting in the Tron's Victorian Bar where she was once a regular. "Tron Participation is giving people an opportunity from a very early age to enter into the world of theatre, which is a world that might sometimes seem quite inaccessible or dry. Whether you want to be an actor or not, something like this is vitally important for young people in terms of their well-being, confidence and communication, all the things that make you a human being. That's what matters here.

"Some people may want to be actors, but not know how to get there, and for others it might be about meeting other people and gaining the confidence to express themselves."

As an actress whose first experience of theatre came via her local amateur dramatics group followed by a stint in the National Youth Theatre when still a teenager, Jensen understands more than most the value of having access to the arts. This was brought home even more when she spent a day with Tron Participation's assorted groups earlier in the year, getting a flavour of exactly what goes on in a scheme that rarely makes the headlines.

"With school, there's very much the idea of a right and wrong answer to something," Jensen says "whereas with theatre there isn't really a right and wrong. It's more about exploration, acting, reacting, giving, sharing and being part of a company. That's one of the things I loved when I started out. I felt very much part of a family, and in a world that seems increasingly more solitary, it's

a really basic thing to be able to look someone in the eye and communicate with them. That's where Tron Participation is important."

With some 47,000 young people and adults having taken part in Tron Participation over the past decade, Jensen's observations are clearly validated, as they were too when she took part in a guided tour of Tron Participation's assorted programmes led by some of its participants.

These included modules for theatre design, as well as a Tron

Ambassadors scheme, which gives access to young people all of the theatre's activities.

Following this, Jensen watched *Subject To Change*, a new play devised by the Tron Young Company with professional director Martin O'Connor. If the next generation of acting talent were to be found anywhere in Tron Participation, it was in this complex, and funny look at inter-personal relationships that featured a set of fantastic performances.

In the bar afterwards, Jensen chatted to the cast in between posing for photographs with a stream of Tron participants.

"It was great to talk to them all while everyone was still buzzing," Jensen said later. "It reminded me of when I was younger, and the high you get doing something like that."

Jensen is eloquent in her praise for the Tron's education manager Lisa Keenan and drama officer Deborah McArthur, who somewhat miraculously are the sole people in charge of Tron Participation.

"They are remarkable women doing a remarkable job," Jensen says. "What I can hopefully do for the Tron Angels scheme is to blow a bit of a trumpet on their behalf, to make sure more people know it's happening, and to help raise the money to make sure such brilliant work can carry on. This is just the beginning."