

News Release

***The Muse* at Leighton House Museum Beauty. Nudity. Ambition. The Rise and Fall of Fame A new multimedia play by Palimpsest From 12 – 28 March 2014**

In March Leighton House Museum, former home and studio of Frederic, Lord Leighton, hosts the world premiere of *The Muse*, a multi-media play by theatre company Palimpsest. Based on recent research, the play brings to light new revelations about the fascinating relationship between the Victorian artist and his muse, the actress Dorothy Dene. The ten-night only production is the culmination of an extensive programme of events accompanying the current exhibition at Leighton House, *A Victorian Obsession. The Pérez Simón Collection* (14 November – 29 March 2015) which showcases masterpieces from the largest private collection of Victorian art outside the UK, including images of Dorothy Dene herself.

Following the sell-out success of the production *Hedda* in April 2014, Leighton House is delighted to be working again with Palimpsest to present an extended run of a new multi-media play that fuses theatre, film and online elements. The play begins with a drinks soirée and then the scene moves through the glorious salons of Leighton's palace of art to culminate in the artist's studio, where Dorothy often posed nude for Leighton.

Frederic, Lord Leighton (Scarborough, Yorkshire, 1830 - London, 1896) was one of the most influential figures of the Victorian age, establishing an international standing and reputation which led him to become President of the Royal Academy in 1878. He was well acquainted with members of the Royal Family and with most of the great artists, writers and politicians of his era. His charm, handsome appearance and cosmopolitan background allowed him to move in the highest social circles and forge friendships across the continent. But Leighton remains an enigmatic figure: he left no diaries and his letters are telling in their lack of reference to his personal circumstances. He never married and he lived and travelled alone however rumours of him having a child with one of his models, in addition to the supposition that he may have been homosexual, continue to be debated today.

Dorothy Dene was born Ada Alice Pullan in 1859, the daughter of an impoverished family from South London. In 1879 she met Leighton and soon became his principal model and muse for the rest of his life. Originally living in Clapham, Dorothy and her sisters moved to a flat in Avonmore Mansions just a few minutes' walk from Leighton's home and she was reported as spending a great deal of time with him at his house. Leighton supported Ada's ambitions to become an actress and for a few years she established a reasonably successful career; she also became what would today be termed a 'celebrity' with her image used in advertisements and promotions and the press commenting on her beauty and fashionable clothes. But the social position of an artist's model and actress remained precarious.

The true nature of the relationship between the artist and his muse has never been resolved. Through this new play, audiences are invited to draw their own conclusions as they witness some of the complexities and tensions that surrounded the artist and his muse in the very room where their relationship developed. Katherine Tozer, Creative Director at Palimpsest and author of *The Muse* said: *"To research and create a piece of theatre about the occupants of this astonishing house in the 1880s has been a fascinating and at times ghostly process. When my company performed 'Hedda' within these walls last spring, the production felt more like a haunting than a play. We are seeking to explore this even more specifically with The Muse, creating a unique theatrical experience based on the extreme proximity of audience and performer. We do not acknowledge the audience and aim to create a voyeuristic environment where the viewer feels safe to stare at whatever they want"*

Senior Curator for Leighton House Museum, Daniel Robbins said: *"Palimpsest's production of 'Hedda' in Leighton's studio demonstrated its potential as a venue and no story could find a more appropriate home there than the intriguing relationship between Leighton and Dorothy Dene. The Muse will re-animate the studio space in a way that we are sure will captivate audiences and provoke a re-evaluation of this relationship and the status of the artist's model in the Victorian age"*.

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LISTINGS

The Muse. *Beauty. Nudity. Ambition. The Rise and Fall of Fame*

Dates: 12, 20, 23, 27, 28 March 2015 **SOLD OUT:** 13, 14, 19, 24, 25 March

Time: Play begins at 7.45pm; doors open at 7.15pm for drinks soirée

Venue: Leighton House Museum. 12 Holland Park Road. London W14 8LZ

Entry: £25. Not suitable for under 14 yr olds

Ticket booking: www.eventbrite.co.uk

More information: www.rbkc.gov.uk/AVictorianObsession | www.palimpsest.co/

NOTES TO EDITOR

About Leighton House Museum

Located on the edge of Holland Park in Kensington, Leighton House Museum is one of the most remarkable buildings of the 19th century. Owned and operated by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the house was the former home and studio of the leading Victorian artist, Frederic, Lord Leighton (1830-1896). The house was built to his precise requirements combining studio space with domestic accommodation and entertaining space. Originally constructed on a modest basis, it grew to become a 'private palace of art' visited by many of the great artists of the day and regarded as one of the architectural sights of London.

The Arab Hall, designed to display Leighton's priceless collection of over a thousand Islamic tiles, is the centrepiece of the house. A compelling vision of the Orient is created through the Islamic tiles, mostly brought back from Damascus in Syria, combined with the gold mosaicked interior, marble columns and golden dome. The opulence continues through the richly decorated interiors, adorned with elaborate mosaic floors and walls lined with peacock blue tiles by the ceramic artist William De Morgan. On the first floor, the grand painting studio with its great north window, dome and apse is the room in which all Leighton's important later works were produced, including the celebrated *Flaming June*. Also on the first floor, the Silk Room displays paintings by Leighton's friends and contemporaries. The house was restored to great acclaim between 2008-10, winning an RIBA award and a Europa Nostra award. For more information visit www.leightonhouse.co.uk

About Palimpsest

Palimpsest present pared back plays, staged simply, in historic buildings. We examine the original text through the prism of web design and film, creating a layered world that can be explored online by the audience member in the days that lead up to and follow the live performance. For our first production, *Hedda*, we created a disquieting scrapbook of Hedda Gabler's honeymoon that can be explored at www.hedda.co.uk. For *The Muse*, our web team are building a virtual doll box full of memento mori (a bisque faced Dorothy Dene doll was in existence in the late 19th Century). Both sites include a short film that sheds light on the live performance and asks the audience to view what they see in a different way. For more information please visit www.palimpsest.co/

About A Victorian Obsession

A Victorian Obsession. The Pérez Simón collection at Leighton House Museum presents over fifty two exceptional and rarely exhibited paintings by leading Victorian artists. The pictures all belong to the Mexican collector Juan Antonio Pérez Simón and form the largest private collection of Victorian art outside the UK.

Six important pictures by Leighton himself have returned to the house in which they were first painted.

Also on display are outstanding pictures by Albert Moore, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais, John William Waterhouse, Edward Poynter, John Strudwick and John William Godward. These artists knew Leighton and were entertained at his house.

To make way for the exhibition, with the exception of Leighton's studio, the permanent collection has been cleared and the exhibition is hung throughout the house providing a unique opportunity to see these works against the backdrop of Leighton's decorative schemes.

The combination of the house and the paintings makes A Victorian Obsession an unmissable event and a one-off aesthetic experience for anyone interested in the art of the nineteenth century. For more information please visit www.rbkc.gov.uk/AVictorianObsession