

Musical follows in Barnstaple playwright's footsteps

Ella Sampson

NEARLY 300 years after Barnstaple playwright John Gay left North Devon to make his name in London, a North Devon artist is following the same path - this time bringing his story with her.

Sarah Lee Pettifer, known professionally as Mrs Animation, has had her original production *GAY The Musical* selected for the Lambeth Fringe 2026, following three sold-out performances in Barnstaple.

The show celebrates the life of Gay, described as one of Britain's most influ-

ential yet often overlooked playwrights, blending original music, comedy, ghosts and satire to introduce his story to modern audiences.

Ms Pettifer, who wrote, directed and produced the show as well as composing its original music and lyrics, said: "Taking this production to London feels incredibly special because we're following the same journey John Gay made almost 300 years ago. It feels like we're taking a little piece of Barnstaple with us."

Ms Pettifer lives and works in Barnstaple, and is better known in the art world for her hand-painted, sequin-covered neon artwork, created under the

name Mrs Animation. Every piece is individually hand-painted, with each sequin placed by hand. She has said her love of art and music came from her mother, a textile artist, and that the fun, music-filled household she grew up in continues to influence the spirit of her work.

Beyond her visual art, Pettifer creates visuals for major DJs and festivals, and performs VJ sets alongside leading DJ Propaganda. Her work has been used by John Giddings of Solo Music Agency, and has featured at the Isle of Wight Festival, Reading Festival and Boardmasters, as well as in galleries and art exhibitions internationally.

She has also developed an augmented reality app, Hocus Art, which brings her artwork to life with colour and music when scanned through a phone.

GAY The Musical follows John Gay as he "fights to reclaim his place in British theatre", blending historical detail with modern humour, larger-than-life characters and comedy. It features an ensemble cast drawn from North Devon.

One audience member from its Barnstaple run said: "Thank you for bringing our Barumite history to life so brilliantly... Absolutely loved it! I'll smile every time I pass John Gay Road now."

The production will run at the Golden Goose Theatre in Camberwell, London,

on 14 and 15 October, as part of Lambeth Fringe 2026, with performances at 8.30pm and a running time of 60 minutes. The show carries a content guidance of 5+, with occasional mild language and comic innuendo.

The Golden Goose Theatre, an 85-seat venue near Oval, was founded by Michael Kingsbury in 2020 as a creative hub for theatre-makers.

It has previously hosted Offie-winning company Out of the Forest Theatre and Fringe First winner Chris Lerner, and Kingsbury himself has been recognised with an award for Outstanding Contribution to Pub Theatre by London Pub Theatres.

Campaign winning numbers game

● Supporters of Tarka Line upgrade heartened by latest surge in rail service passenger figures

Ella Sampson

CAMPAIGNERS pushing for a major upgrade to North Devon's railway line say passenger numbers on the route have hit record highs, as they begin work on a funding bid they hope could deliver a half-hourly service between Barnstaple and Exeter.

Sixteen delegates from 12 partner and stakeholder organisations, representing the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, met in Exeter on Thursday, July 9, to begin putting together a Strategic Outline Business Case, the first of three funding stages required before central government would consider committing money to the project.

The Alliance said the line "continues to beat all known records since 2001" for passenger volumes, with each of the first three months of this financial year setting new highs.

The first-stage business case is expected to cost around £150,000.

Campaign group Railfuture has already committed £10,000 from its Fighting Fund, built up from legacies. Roger Blake, Railfuture's national board director for infrastructure and networks and convener of the Alliance, said: "We all need to find our own ways of putting some money where our mouths are. Central government tends to sit up and take more notice when third-party sources contribute, however small or large their individual sum, and from across a broad spectrum of representative organisations."

The Alliance is targeting completion of the business case by its fourth annual convention in early March next year, timed to coincide with the government opening calls for schemes to be funded through the next Comprehensive Spending Review, covering 2028 to 2032.

If successful, the next step would see central government commit funding towards a more detailed Outline Business Case, expected to cost several million pounds.

Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall regional branch, said: "We all have to be in it to win it. It's a long



Delegates from 12 partner and stakeholder organisations meet in Exeter for the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance workshop earlier this month. Below left: Lord Peter Hendy, Minister of State for Rail. Below right, left to right: David Whiteway (GWR), Tim Steer (Railfuture) and Andrew Robinson (Network Rail)



slog, but the size of the prize, not just for northern Devon but actually for most of Devon's current districts, given the wider network benefits, is incalculable."

He added: "A half-hourly service from Barnstaple getting into Exeter in 45 minutes? Turning that vision into reality is our mission. We must, however, be mindful of other growth-enabling schemes in the Devon Metro network, such as Tavistock-Plymouth and a West

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Central government tends to take more notice when third-party sources contribute, however small or large their individual sum

of England line upgrade, especially now that Marlcombe is due for 10,000 new homes."

Ian Roome, MP for North Devon, sent a message of support to the meeting, which he was unable to attend in person.

In a letter, which Railfuture has shared with the *Gazette*, he wrote: "Please extend my thanks to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, and all the stakeholder organisations meeting again this Thursday to give North Devon's Rail Tarka Line the attention it deserves."

He said he had read Network Rail's report, *Transforming the North Devon Line*, with interest, adding it was very clear that a dependable train service will simply be unsustainable without interventions to improve the capacity and resilience of the Tarka Line itself.

Mr Roome said he had recently heard from a constituent who had caught four trains between Barnstaple and Exeter in the space of two weeks, all delayed by more than an hour, which she said had affected her education and everyday life.

He wrote: "Ahead of a new capital investment round from spring 2028, a plan is needed that shows passengers across northern Devon that we believe strongly in public rail for the public good."

He said Network Rail's summary of potential infrastructure enhancements between Barnstaple and Exeter suggested "a phased programme may be more realistic", adding: "Can I urge everybody in the room to be clear-eyed about this: focusing on what will make a genuine difference to passengers, in a timeframe they will see. We need a real plan that can be both paid for and delivered."

Mr Roome said a planned meeting with Minister of State for Rail, Lord Hendy, had been rearranged following a recent rail crash in Bedfordshire, but that he still expected to raise the case for the line in the coming weeks.

He also noted that a previously empty site next to Barnstaple railway station now has the first structures of nearly 200 new homes under construction, adding: "More passenger demand is coming down the line."

