

Check in at Fawlty Towers

The Seagull Rep are bringing classic comedy Fawlty Towers to the stage one last time. A word of warning from entertainment writer WAYNE SAVAGE though, if Manuel shows you to your seat, check your ticket before getting comfy...

If you think an uncooperative Austin 1100 is a nightmare, try bringing one of TV's most iconic comedies to the stage. Luckily, The Seagull Rep are used to get creative.

"We've made it a proper experience. Manuel will be helping do the tickets, we've got him and Polly as a kind of Greek chorus, in the second half she'll be trying to sell a sketch of someone in the audience. Theatre's the ultimate 3D, not telly or films," says director John Hales as we tail off into our mutual disappointment of Ridley Scott's Prometheus.

It's the company's third and final tour of Fawlty Towers and checks in to Felixstowe's Spa Pavilion on August 28. It's at the Seagull in Lowestoft tonight, tomorrow and August 25-26 and Bungay's Fisher Theatre August 23-24.

Their adaptation of the classic John Cleese comedy has been wowing audiences since they first staged first three episodes in 2009. This tour features The Hotel Inspectors, The Germans and Gourmet Night.

John's wanted to stage the latter since that very first tour; featuring hotel owner Basil Fawlty's infamous run-in with his chaotic car.

Getting a real one on stage isn't an easy process.

"That's why we hadn't done it until now. I thought 'I'm not letting this series get away without us doing it' so we talked to the set guys and it's sitting on the van now."

It was sourced from a private seller in Buckinghamshire and Alastair King of show sponsors MR King personally took a truck to bring it back to Lowestoft's Seagull Theatre. Needing a significant facelift, VB as it's been christened - those familiar with the scene in



MADCAP MAYHEM: The Seagull Rep's final presentation of the comedy classic Fawlty Towers is touring the region right now

Photos: CONTRIBUTED

question will know why - has been painted the original red and undergone a host of other alterations; right down to finding the replica original number plate.

"Luckily we found someone who was very sympathetic to the cause, our producers talked to them and said 'look, we're doing this to raise money for a theatre' so they gave us a very good price.

"Our incredible set team transformed it into the Austin 1100 and it's going to be there on stage with [Basil hitting it with] the branch; the whole thing. We're piloting this thing tonight where we're trying to make all the sound come from it as well. It's a bit of technical jiggery pokery but it's a real challenge."

The whole show has proved a real challenge adds John. No other theatre company he knows of stages it.

"Our first year Fawlty was our little jewel in the crown. It was an insane thing [to do]. One reason is fear, the size of the thing you're trying to attempt in terms of how do you possibly follow those performances, those scripts.

"There're people mouthing along with the dialogue, finishing the lines; it's hell for the actors



because they know if it's not word perfect," he laughs.

"You can't usually cast it. To find someone who can play Basil and Sybil and all the others like Manuel; he's harder [to play] than you think without it descending into some horrible caricature of a Spaniard.

"You can't be an imitator, what's the point; you might as well watch the telly. Neither should you stray so far from the original material. You'd be a mug to say 'well, I think I can do better than Cleese'. There's a built-in expectation but some of the joy of it is for people seeing how it works on stage." Which brings us to problem

two; it's a monster to stage in terms of the props and changes.

"In Gourmet Night you're cutting between three different locations all the time and we've got stuff where something's coming off, something's going on and then they're doing this. You're trying to change a set that was done for TV and make it one long continuous live performance - and you don't have the advantage of the edit and the cut."

The other key, adds John, is picking episodes that work together. You couldn't do The Hotel Inspector and Basil the Rat as it's the same theme, Basil versus authority. It doesn't

IN FOR A DAMN GOOD THRASHING: The Austin 1100 which comes in for the full Basil Fawlty treatment. Far left, Agnes Lillis (Sybil) and Nick Murray Brown (Basil)

help that there's no stage adaptation either. When you license it, all you get are the TV scripts.

"No one's gone in and said 'this won't work on stage, take this apart, do that'. You're actually sitting there with this box of gold going 'ooh, how do you do this'; you'd have to be some kind of cretin to make it unwatchable."

Part curse, fans' love for the show is also part blessing. Unlike many of its contemporaries, it's stood the test of time. John likens episodes to Feydeau French farces.

"Ours has a lot of heart and enough differences while never going so far that someone like me in the audience who's actually a big fan goes 'oh hell'. Hopefully audiences will come out thinking 'that's a really clever way to have done that' or 'I can't believe they managed to do that and make me feel like that'.

"And to see them playing out at speed in real time in front of you... by the end poor old Nick [Murray Brown, who plays Basil]... I said to him 'it's a shame the Olympics are over because by the time Gourmet's finished, running backwards and forwards, you'll be ready for the marathon,'" he laughs.

