

The centre of attention

Artists are using a makeshift pub in a shopping precinct as a performance space. Will the public buy it, asks Rachel Devine

A shopping centre in Govan is not the first place that springs to mind when considering Glasgow's more innovative arts spaces. On a cold, damp November day, when the only available refreshment is the water sprayed across the pavement by a No 17 bus, nor does it seem a likely venue for a Saturday night pint.

But in this concrete corner of the south-side, in a boarded-up unit opposite a coin-operated Paddington Bear children's ride, is a new one-off arts bar called Allotment where live performance, art and music fuse with the surroundings of an old men's pub. It's arguably the most unlikely pairing since Andy Murray was introduced to rap.

Unlike Murray's lamentable foray into hip-hop, however, Allotment is a happy case of opposites attracting, or at the very least finding common ground over a few beers. A collaboration between a team of artists from the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) and community groups based in the Govan area, it's been a hit among visitors and locals alike, which has come as a relief to Angie Bual, the theatre and events producer who came up with the idea.

"I was very, very nervous on the day of the first one," says Bual, who is on a year-long placement with NTS, part-funded by the Cultural Leadership Programme, a government initiative. "I was talking to my mentor at NTS, Neil Murray, and he said that at 3pm that day he suddenly thought, 'what are we doing?' and at 11pm that night Vicky Featherstone [director of NTS] said, 'this defines National Theatre of Scotland'."

Bual, whose background is in London's spoken-word scene, takes her inspiration as much from contemporary theatre collectives such as Punchdrunk and Shunt — who create performances in derelict and abandoned buildings in the UK capital — as the 1960s theatre companies that pioneered interactive community theatre.

This Saturday, for the second bi-monthly Allotment event, the artists have transformed the space into a retro gaming zone



for the theme "gaming and morality". The audience, or rather the punters, will be given the opportunity to participate in games and theatrical vignettes, including a life-sized version of the 1970s Atari arcade game Pong and a theatrical musing on the art of gambling. Drinks will be served by staff from the Brechin Bar (which has upped sticks from across the road for the night). There will even be karaoke.

"There's a lobbyist in America called Jack Thompson who is basically the Mary Whitehouse of video games," says James Houston, one of four artists involved in this month's event. "He's bitterly against violence in video games, even though they are rated for a mature audience and are not meant to be seen by seven-year-olds."

"With Pong, we wanted to challenge that idea by taking it a stage beyond killing

soldiers or stealing cars, like in Grand Theft Auto, and create stripped down games that remove the computer and allow real people to influence the games." In essence, as people walk into the middle of the game, they can control the movement of the graphics in this primitive tennis match.

Houston, a film-maker and graphic artist, made headlines when he graduated from Glasgow School of Art last year with a video work that used hard drives and dot-matrix printers to remix a song by Radiohead. It became an internet sensation.

He has collaborated with the theatre and performance artist Kieran Hurley, the electronic media artist Paul Maguire and the theatre writer Gary McNair to create the mother of all games rooms. "There is a moral implication of how much you want to mess up somebody's game, how much you want to make yourself an obstacle to somebody else," says Hurley. "But at the end of the day, it's just a really cool thing to have in a bar."

The bar is at the heart of the space and video screens will beam the action from the other end of the room to those who prefer to sit quietly with a glass of pinot grigio.

"It's important to work with a relaxed crowd," says Bual. "When people have had a few drinks, you can really hit them with something surprising. There was a moment in the last Allotment when paper boats fell out of a wardrobe suspended from the ceiling — that really turned heads."

"They might not think they are getting a story out of it, but everybody at the last Allotment came away with a story, even if they had just been drinking and chatting all night. That's why I put it in a shopping centre and made it a bar — those are two things everyone knows about. I wanted to get an audience that looks like your average supermarket queue."



If someone wants to have a pint and not engage in the weird nonsense, they're welcome



The team — from left, Hurley, Houston, Bual and Maguire — have installed a life-sized arcade game in the shopping centre, inset

But what will your average supermarket queue make of artists who deconstruct video games for a living? "We're adamant that the art bit is optional," says Houston. "If somebody wants to come in and have a pint and not engage with all the weird arts nonsense, they're more than welcome."

The community groups are an interesting mix. The GalGael Trust, which helps young people and the homeless build boats and furniture, built the distinctive boat-

shaped bar area. The Maggie's Nest, a nearby thrift shop, has donated old games and is selling tickets for the event.

Young people from a local arts group, Impact, have helped create work for the space, as have members of the Bridges Programmes — an group that arranges work experience placements for asylum seekers and refugees. "I've always been interested in how we can put theatre in a different context so that people who don't

think it's for them can see it in a different, more accessible way," says Bual. "Often with theatre you have to go through a box office and then you're a prisoner in a room. I wanted to create a more democratic experience and to put community work next to professional work in a place where people feel safe."

The next Allotment event is on December 5. For details, visit www.allotment-glasgow.co.uk