



TALK OF THE TOWN

Openings, closings, people and places

GOLD TAPE

Leave her alone, she's a performance artist

Refurbishment of the Royal Festival Hall, Phase One: Level Access, Additional Parking Bays... I've lost you already, haven't I? Few things are more tiresome than a renovation scheme. It's going to be boring, it's going to be dusty, it was good enough already... And this is where art steps in and stops us all being so grumpy and myopic.

If you passed through the foyer of the Royal Festival Hall this week you would have seen a builder in a hard hat and high-visibility jacket. Workmen started already, you might have tutted. But closer inspection shows that the builder is surprisingly pretty and sylph-like ("She's no brickie" I heard one lady chuckle). And she is not drilling, making dust or reading *The Sun*. She is unspooling satiny gold ribbon and wrapping it deliberately, delicately around the brass banister, looping it erratically over the brochure stand, festooning it gaily across the Box Office.

"Daft!" muttered old ladies into their sandwiches. "Weeeee!" concurred little boys skidding over the foyer floor. "Funny stuff," said a visiting Irishman queuing for a ticket. "Funny but cute." The keynote response, one could say, was perplexity. But then the installation became more interactive.

The builder (properly Dot Howard, performance artist and recent graduate of St Martin's College) cast a length of ribbon between the banisters, making a cordon. A large man with a ponytail attempting to use the staircase saw the cordon and retreated in confusion. Then Dot made a gracious and unbuilderly beckoning motion, inviting him to come and cut the ribbon with a pair of scissors. "In anticipation of the forthcoming building work," she told him smilingly. Rather tickled, the man with the ponytail sliced the golden ribbon with élan, and a little triumphal gesture.

I watched Dot repeat this routine several times, and it was remarkable how much delight people took in it. The installation, entitled *Taped*, is undeniably fanciful, silly - and hence it leavens the charmlessness of construction work. It prepares people for the idea that their public space is going to be transformed, and it makes them feel like participants in this transformation. "There are a lot of regulars here," says Deb Hoy, Dot's artistic partner and co-deviser of the



Tangled up in gold: artist Dot Howard busily wrapping the Festival Hall in ribbon JOEL CHANT

project. "This is about introducing the changes to them." "We're regulars here ourselves," chips in Dot. "That's why we wanted to do this. She used to be an usher and I worked in the CD shop."

But for all their enthusiasm for the site, both artists look nonplussed when a woman rushes over and asks where the Ladies is. Dot waves vaguely in the direction of the other end of the Hall. Perhaps the premises really do need a re-design. The woman wanders off while Deb and Dot get back to the business of arranging satin ribbon.

Deb has contributed to the project with a sculpture, a tall, gleaming edifice in which water condenses and evaporates. "It's a memorial to Hungerford Water Tower, which is about to be demolished," she explains. "It's a sculpture basically about flux and transition. Although I wish children would stop hurling themselves against it."

Dot and Deb, both diminutive, both sporting twinkling nose-rings, are unlikely ambassadors for the construction work at the Royal Festival Hall. But their art goes some way to relaxing our natural antipathy to change and scaffolding. And their *coup de théâtre* is only just beginning: today, the artists are winding 2,000 metres of golden ribbon around the Hall. It worked when Christo and Jeanne-Claude did it for the Reichstag. And with sunshine, staplers and a bit of luck, it should work for Deb and Dot.

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