

Stars team up for one-off West End performance to help needy children



Gemma Arterton will be among the famous names on the Old Vic stage Jack Hill for The Times

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The lead actor of *Sherlock* and one of Hollywood's favourite young British actresses have teamed up with the director of *Slumdog Millionaire* for what is certain to become one of the year's hottest theatre tickets.

Sadly for their millions of fans, the production that Benedict Cumberbatch, Gemma Arterton — star of *Prince of Persia* and *Tamara Drewe* — and Danny Boyle are working on together is a one-night-only affair: a star-studded charity performance of a new work called *The Children's Monologues* at the Old Vic on November 14.

Like *The Vagina Monologues*, a play written by Eve Ensler, which fashioned a worldwide hit from stories about child abuse, gynaecology and menstruation, the subject matter is not obviously commercial. Drawn from the personal testimonies of 250 children living in harrowing conditions in rural South Africa, the script for *The Children's Monologues* features rape, violence and terminal illness.

However, the formidable array of acting and writing talent that Boyle has helped to assemble virtually guarantees a sell-out and raises the possibility of further high-profile performances.

"It should be a pretty extraordinary night," Cumberbatch told *The Times*. "One of the privileges of doing something as high profile as *Sherlock* [the hit BBC update of the Conan Doyle stories, in which he played Holmes] is the effect that you can have, that you can help raise awareness or even money for a good cause. It's an extraordinary position to be in."

In addition to Cumberbatch and Arterton, actors and actresses confirmed for the evening so far include Sam West (*Enron, Howard's End*), Romola Garai (*Atonement, Emma*) Tom Hiddleston (*War Horse, Thor*), Eddie Redmayne (*The Other Boleyn Girl, Elizabeth*) and Nikki Amuka-Bird (*Small Island*).

They will perform 12 monologues assembled by a crack squad of playwrights including Lynn Nottage (a Pulitzer Prize winner for *Ruined*), Bola Agbaje (an Olivier award winner for *Gone Too Far!*) Polly Stenham (*That Face*) and Kwame Kwei-Armah (*Elmina's Kitchen*).

The Children's Monologues are based on the tales of children helped by the charity Dramatic Need who were invited to relate a day that made them happy or sad. Their responses include descriptions of what it is like to watch your parents die from Aids-related conditions, to endure gang rape or to resort to gangsterism to survive, as well as more joyful memories, such as a mother bringing a cake home.

Boyle, who is producing, and who hopes to direct the production on the night, said: "The rawness of the original stories in *The Children's Monologues* punch you in the stomach. They have that directness that you find with children anywhere. They can't compartmentalise or filter traumatic stuff so they just say it. With that directness comes this terrible heart-wrenching intimacy. They talk about experiences that no child should go through, but like the children anywhere they have this incredible optimism that comes through, no matter how bleak the experience.

"You don't always want to know these things are going on in the world, especially to children, but when those actors get up on stage in London it will mean that another thousand people hear those stories, and that those kids really have a hell of a voice."

Dramatic Need, the beneficiary of the event, was set up in 2004, and sends artists, actors and musicians to work with children living in abysmal conditions in sub-Saharan Africa.

The London performance of *The Children's Monologues* will be mirrored by a production in South Africa featuring schoolchildren, and funds raised from the two events will help to finance a new independent arts and drama centre for children in rural South Africa.