

# The play they lived – and died – through

BY AISHA IQBAL

A NEW play charting the deadly dust legacy which engulfed a corner of west Leeds for decades is to be given its world premiere in the heart of that community.

West Yorkshire Playhouse's production about Armley's long-running asbestos nightmare will make its debut in a derelict factory building in the town.

The poignant setting will provide the first-ever opening away from the Playhouse for one of the theatre's own shows.

Simply entitled *Dust*, the drama chronicles one woman's epic battle to get justice after she and thousands in her community were exposed to the killer asbestos fibres that spewed from a local textile plant for decades.

## Oblivious

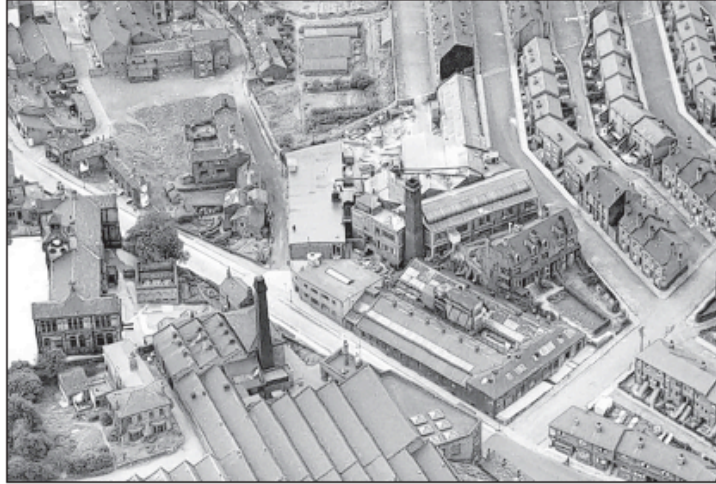
Imagine the scene. A snowy playground in a corner of Armley.

Young children frolic in the schoolyard, making snowballs from the white powder falling from the heavens.

But this was no winter wonderland.

The 'snow' was in fact asbestos-infected, cancer-causing dust which had been spewing from the nearby JW Roberts factory since as far back as the 1930s, with everyone oblivious to the future repercussions.

The play follows the true-life journey



PLAY PREMIERE: The former JW Roberts factory in Armley, Leeds

of a local woman June Hancock, who was diagnosed in 1993 with mesothelioma, after her exposure to asbestos in 1930s Armley.

She subsequently took the factory's owners in to court and won a major compensation battle.

The play uses trial transcripts, interviews and letters to tell the story of that epic legal battle.

*Dust* will be presented in conjunction with the 2009 I Love West Leeds Festival.

Festival director Jane Earnshaw said it was vital that the Armley asbestos story was told from within the heart of the community, despite the sadness inevitably attached to it for many local people.

"It's still a current story and it will be for a while, unfortunately," she said.

Armley Labour councillor Janet Harper said the play would be a sad reminder of lives already lost, and many people watching it might recall playing in the white dust as children.

But it was "essential the story is told."

The JW Roberts plant closed in the 1950s, but the number of its victims continues to grow.

Despite increased knowledge and the introduction of new, tough regulations on the use and disposal of asbestos, Armley's painful asbestos legacy continues to play out further tragedies.

## Compensation

Figures released by the Government just a few weeks ago showed that between 1981 and 2006, nearly 600 people from Leeds died from mesothelioma, and the numbers grow almost monthly.

The cancer destroys the lining of the lungs and can take 60 years to show itself.

It can be caused by the inhalation of a single fibre of the mineral and usually kills within 12 months of diagnosis.

June Hancock's real-life courtroom battle with Turner Newall, the US-based parent company of JW Roberts, lasted three years.

Despite being seriously ill by then, Mrs Hancock survived long enough to win compensation in a case which set a precedent for thousands.

She died in June, 1997, just a few weeks after her historic victory.

Written by Kenneth F Yates, *Dust* will make its debut in July.

There will be one performance at the I Love West Leeds Festival before the play moves to the Playhouse for an extended run.

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