



The drama of supporting the Albion

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action. Mike Ward unearths the individuals who have one thing in common... a love of the Albion

You may not have spotted his name on the team sheet but Mark Brailsford knows exactly what it's like to play in front of a capacity crowd of passionate Albion fans. He has, you might say, felt the love.

"There was one night," he recalls, "when this big, tattooed bloke, really scary looking, came up to me afterwards, grabbed me in a headlock and cried, 'I loved that!'"

Nice to make an impression, I guess. This wasn't after a match at Withdean, mind you. Nor at an actual football ground.

This was at Sussex University's Gardner Arts Centre, as it then was – just a stone's throw away from where the glorious Amex is now rising – and where Mark was performing in a play before a packed house of 400. It was the summer of 2001, the Albion's centenary year.

Actually, I say "a play". In fact, Mark describes his role in *Brighton Till I Die*, the Albion-themed drama penned by writers Paul Hodson and Dave Blake, as "by a distance, the best acting job I've ever been paid for or asked to do."

You can probably figure out why. The Shoreham-born actor – regularly treading the boards these days at Brighton's Pavilion Theatre, where his critically acclaimed satirical hit *The Treason Show* takes an ever-changing pop at those in the news – has been passionate about the club

since his dad first took him along, aged seven, to the Goldstone. This was back during Brian Clough's brief reign. "I remember Dad pointing Clough out to me," Mark recalls, "and saying, 'See that man? He's very famous. He's going to do great things for us...'"

clown character who appeared in a succession of guises as the story evolved and helped link the plot. The play told the Albion's story from the club's inception 100 years earlier to the great escape at Hereford, with the writers playing the role of two fans heading to that extraordinary fixture.

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Mark grew accustomed to disappointments at an early age, then. But he's never lost his love for his local side – and feels particularly strongly about its links with its community. Indeed, press him on the subject of Premier League football – and particularly those who run the game at that level – and he becomes... well, spectacularly libellous, to be honest.

To avoid landing *Seagull* with a writ, he then kindly tones down his remarks and simply states, for the record, that top-flight football, the way it is right now, is "something I don't really want to watch or be a part of".

Mark's role in *Brighton Till I Die*, which ran for five very successful nights nine summers ago, was that of Mr Albion, a Shakespearean-type

"When Paul and Dave asked me if I'd like to be involved," he recalls, "I bit their hands off.

"I loved the epic nature of the story in any case, but because it was the Albion and I remember the dark days of the mid-90s so vividly, it meant everything.

"I'd been so upset by what was happening. Everyone was. But until that play, I hadn't been aware of the emotional power of the audience reaction.

"The moment that got me, literally rocked me back on my heels on our first night, was the audience's response when the first Mr Albion character barked out the words 'the articles of association.'" [This referred to the legal documentation from

which, it had been discovered in 1995, the club's directors had quietly yet scandalously removed a no-profit clause, meaning they could legally close the club down if they so wished, and cash in from selling the Goldstone].

"It wasn't that the audience actually made any noise," Mark recalls, "but I could literally feel their anger. It was as if I'd been walloped by a tropical storm. I'd never felt anything like it."

Mark, who went on to star in *Blue & White Christmas* at Brighton's Komedica, believes football and theatre, handled correctly, really can mix. "It's often tricky," he concedes, "because the drama in sport is traditionally on the pitch, but if you use the right dramatic devices it can be wonderfully effective.

"Brighton Till I Die attracted people who'd otherwise never think of going to the theatre. I think that's fantastic."

The *Treason Show* (refreshed with new songs and sketches every couple of months – it celebrates its 10th anniversary this year), has allowed Mark further opportunity, as director, writer and performer, to indulge his Albion passion, in between the main bits where the show pokes fun at politicians and such like.

"We've done songs about Bobby Zamora, Micky Adams, Dick Knight, Falmer, you name it.

"But my favourite was actually a sketch we did called *News 2024*, looking into the future. That was great fun!

"Meanwhile," we had the newsreader say, 'Champions League winners Brighton and Hove Albion collected their eighth trophy tonight by beating Barcelona 10-1.

"Their manager, Sir Guy Butters, said, 'It was a wonderful achievement. But, imagine what we could do if we finally get a stadium...'"

● *The Treason Show* is at the Pavilion Theatre, New Road, Brighton, on Friday Sept 17 and Saturday Sept 18. For tickets, call 01273 709709 or go to www.brightondome.org

