



Bailiwick

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Editorial by Phil Hallworth

There's plenty for you to read in this issue and I hope you find the articles interesting, informative and entertaining. Many thanks as always to all contributors.

Our Chairman Andrew Carpenter shares his thoughts now *Elf* is up and running, then our Vice-Chairman, Alex Turasiewicz, provides answers to some of the theatrical superstition teasers he gave us in the last edition (more to follow in subsequent issues). (Dame) Faye Banks is our Desert Island Shows castaway and three of our new members reveal their Musical Firsts. Ian Taylor reviews some recently seen shows. We then meet Jenny Martin from the Hippodrome staff, before former MD Harry Haden-Brown gives us a fascinating insight into his life in the professional orchestra pit. Equally enlightening is Jaleelah Galbraith's account of her conversation with Nic Gibney (our very own Buddy) and our former choreographer Courtney Jackson about their professional work as pantomime dames. Finally, Alex writes a very thought-provoking piece about the possible impact of the 'woke' culture on the choice of our shows in the future.

We're going to squeeze in a special September issue, and this will be all things *Elf* - including a brief history of the musical, an introduction to our new members who are taking part in the show, an article about the set and staging, and the views of the creative team and members of the cast about progress so far! If anyone has anything *Elf* related they would like to share I'd be delighted to hear from you at secretary@blocproductions.co.uk

Phil



Chairman's Overture by Andrew Carpenter

Well, we've waited a long time, but here we all are back in rehearsals for our next production at the Bristol Hippodrome. It's been a long and frustrating wait, but we can all put that behind us now as we embark on the exciting journey of presenting ***Elf - the Musical***. The response at the box office has been nothing short of phenomenal and to be writing these notes three months before curtain up with 85%+ of tickets sold is unprecedented.

I would like to offer my congratulations to all those successful in auditions and best wishes to everybody involved in the production. The creative/production team has been working hard for months in putting together a production of which we can all be proud. I assure you it will have the WOW factor!

As we get back to something like normality we are building on the 'club culture' that you asked for during our online forums and with that in mind, Carrie and her social team are putting together a couple of events which I hope you will all support. In addition, we are co-opting two new additional committee members in Emma Griffiths and Vicky Hayes, both of whom expressed interest following our recent AGM. They are both aware committee members are never without portfolio under my leadership! With the committee in mind there is always so much to do and a couple of extra pairs of hands will be gratefully received. In addition, I would like to thank Rachel Davey and Jenny Foster for helping with PR & Marketing and Social Responsibility respectively without joining the committee. It's a great pleasure for me to see people volunteering and wanting to play an active part in the future of BLOC Productions.

Finally, I would like to personally congratulate Peter Sutton on achieving his diamond bar status for NODA in completing sixty years in amateur theatre, all with BLOC Productions. This is a wonderful feat and recognition of the dedication and service Peter has given to amateur theatre in general and BLOC Productions in particular. It is people like Peter who are the backbone of organisations like our own. Peter you are an absolute star!!



Theatrical Superstitions ***by Alex Turasiewicz***

In the last edition we listed a few Theatrical Superstitions and asked for your interpretations of them with a BLOC twist. Here are the original ideas behind some of those we included last time:

A bad Dress rehearsal means the show will be a hit

No one is quite sure how this particular superstition started. But many theatre folks get nervous if the dress rehearsal goes too well. They firmly believe that a bad dress is a good omen for the success of opening night. This does prove true sometimes and most likely has its roots in simple psychology: a horrible dress rehearsal scares cast and crew and focuses their attention. Plus, all mistakes made during the dress, highlight problems which can then be fixed before opening night.

It is bad luck wear to wear the colour blue on stage

The idea that blue should never be worn on stage is a superstition that not many thespians have heard. Perhaps this myth has not survived as strongly as some other superstitions because the reason behind it is no longer relevant. At one point in theatre history, blue dye was the most expensive of all the fabric colourings. Producers, in an effort to discourage the spending of money on such luxuries, started a rumour that blue costumes were unlucky. Even then, the economics of theatre were a dicey risk.

Never give a performer flowers before a show

Giving a performer flowers is one of the great traditions of the theatre. It's a way of telling an actor that you loved what they did on stage. However, it is taboo to give a performer flowers *before* a show. It seems that tradition opposes rewarding an actor for their work before they have delivered it. Which leads us to...

Never light a trio of candles

An open flame on stage is already a risk that many theatres would prefer not to take. The more burning candles in a production, the greater the chance that a fire can get out of control. Many theatres have burned down thanks to the use of open flames, especially during times when theatres were made of thatched roofs (Shakespeare's Globe Theatre burned down when a cannon was set off during a production of *Henry VIII*). Then why aren't we supposed to have lit candles in threes? It is believed that the person who stands closest to the shortest candle will be the first to die. Why do people believe that? The origin to that superstition was extinguished a long time ago, but we still follow the rule.



Desert Island Shows

by Faye Banks



My love of musicals started on a rainy bank holiday Monday in the mid-80s, stumbling across **West Side Story** on TV. Having always thought musicals were ridiculous... I mean, who bursts into song and dance in the middle of a scene... I was so utterly absorbed in the story that the song and dance seemed to not only make sense but also elevate the emotions and propel the narrative. I was sold!

My earliest performance memory is as Fairy Joybelle (can you imagine!) in the local church panto **Good Two Shoes**. I wore a golden tulle dress, tiara, giant wings made of hangar wire and clingfilm, and accessorised with a pre-teen double chin! After a few wilderness gawky teenage years, I re-joined amdram as an adult with Eden Theatre Company in Coventry... my first show in the ensemble of **My Fair Lady**, and later performing in **Godspell** at the Edinburgh Fringe for a week, knacker!

Moving to Bristol, I joined BLOC for **Barnum** in 1997 (sporting an enormous green clown wig... it's fair to say that toxic green isn't my colour!) and then BMCC. After a good few years in the ensemble, I've been lucky enough to grab some cracking principal roles, though it's so hard to say which is my favourite; Disappointed social climber Joyce in **Betty Blue Eyes**, leading a terrifying seven-minute tap routine as Reno in **Anything Goes**, the wisecracking Martha in **White Christmas** or the scary glamour of Morticia in **Addams Family**? As I've moved into middle age (sigh), I look to those musicals with strong female leads of a certain age... I never actually got to play the classic romantic ingénue lead (always taller than the men!), and when I look back on who I might have had to kiss, I reckon I got a lucky pass!

Picking just eight Desert Island Shows is tricky... this list has been revised a few times and I am sure as soon as I send this, I'll change my mind but here goes;

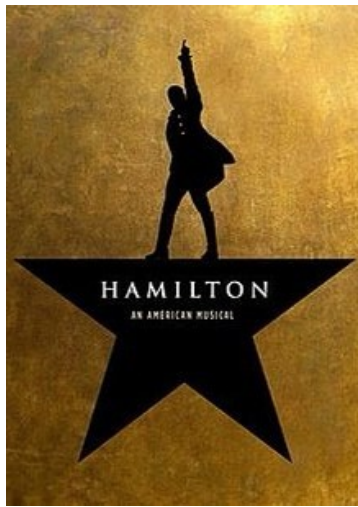
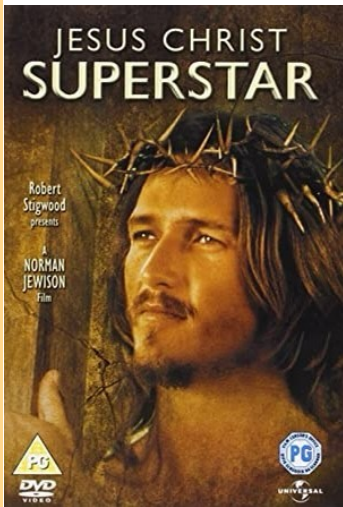


Starlight Express

I had a misspent youth at the local roller disco, going twice a week and three times in holidays throughout much of my teenage years. A pal at the local dance school was auditioning for **Starlight** and asked if I'd teach him to roller-skate. My first ever West End show ended up being seeing him so I must have done a good job! I loved the spectacle, the staging and of course the skating tricks. The skates are still in the loft...

Jesus Christ Superstar

I LOVE this show. Saw it on the West End and lucky enough to perform in it with BLOC. I can literally sing all the parts (some better than others!) from end to end and the 39 lashes always makes me cry. I have two highlights from the BLOC production: (i) us disciple followers having lovely pastries and samosas during the last supper and wafting the smells downstage to the men eating stale pittas and (ii) when the lifting of the cross got stuck and Jesus was left singing with a beautifully lit crotch!



Hamilton

A recent entry. I saw it fairly soon after it opened in the UK and then took my Dad, who wanted to see the rap musical; we both loved it! I'd always been a rap fan and at one point was able to rap the entire 12 minutes of Sugarhill Gang Rapper's Delight (see misspent youth above). The concept, story, staging, execution... creative genius.

Witches of Eastwick

The most fun you can have on stage. Played Jane, the music teacher, with BLOC and had my first flying experience (I was a pro by the time I got to the Wicked Witch of the West in **Oz**)... the Hippodrome is very high, I'm not sure I ever need to see the lighting rig face on again! Oh, and top tip, if you ever need to fly, buy some old school sanitary pads and stick 'em on your hip bones... you'll thank me!

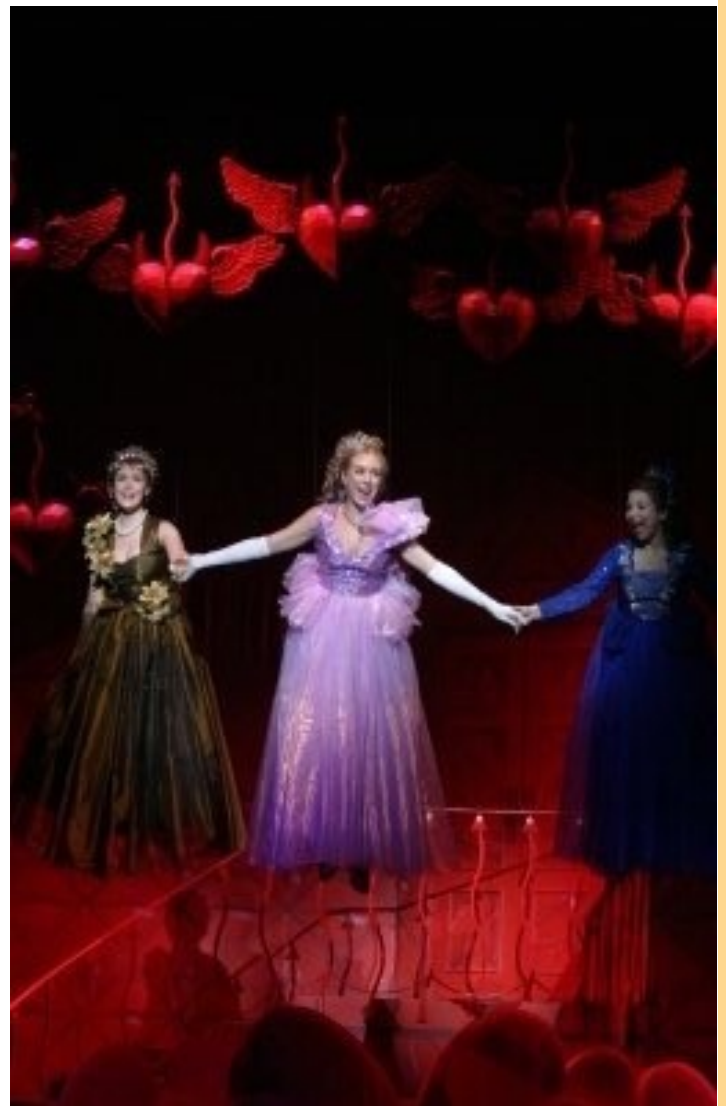
I know they're not musicals but I think they still fall under shows, so bear with me as I move into plays...

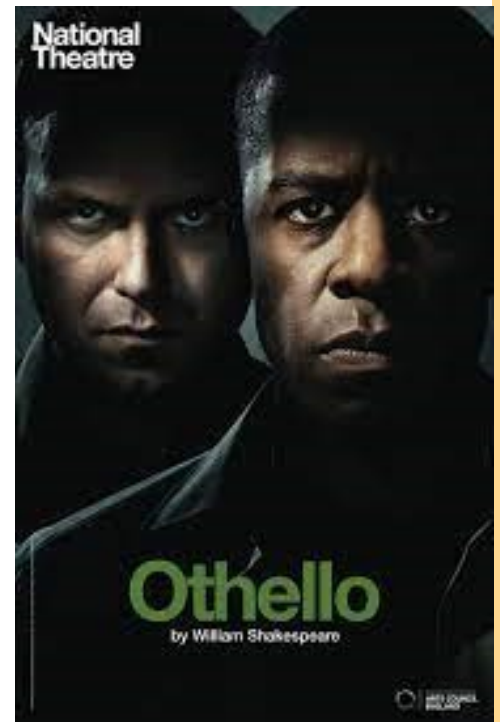
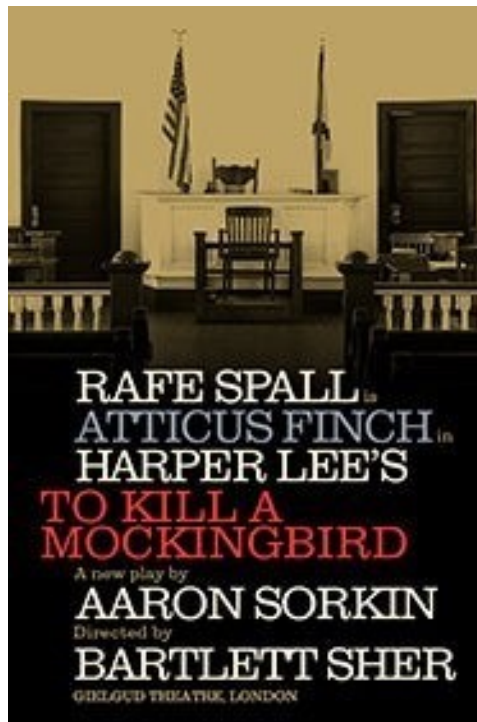
All about Eve

The Joan Crawford film is a classic with the best line "*Fasten your seat belts, it's gonna be a bumpy night*" and was recently adapted for the stage starting Gillian Anderson. I was obsessed with the X-Files and have loved Gillian's work since. This was an absolute masterclass in acting and a part I would love to play.

Glengarry Glen Ross

The 1992 film is based on the 1984 Pulitzer Prize Winning play by David Mamet. I think it still holds the record for the most profanities in a stage production... even more so when rehearsing it (excellent post work therapy!) and I got this chance when Ship & Castle choose to run an all-female and all-male version on alternate nights. I recently saw it on the West End with Christian Slater playing the role I played, originated by Al Pacino in the film... uncanny resemblance, yes?





To Kill A Mockingbird

I'm a cliché ... this is probably on most people's favourite books list. It's been adapted into a play twice and I've been lucky enough to see both, once in Bath and very recently on the West End. This classic tale of racial prejudice and injustice is beautifully and heartbreakingly delivered.

Othello

Finally, my last choice had to be a Shakespeare. I go pretty much every year to the RSC at Stratford for my birthday and cram in two plays for my fix. I'm not a big fan of the comedies (though I would love to play Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing!*) but I love the tragedy and history plays. *Othello* is either turgid or exhilarating and I've seen both. It's also very long and so the former is torture, especially if you're in the cheap seats. But I saw the latter with Adrian Lester and Rory Kinnear at The National a few years ago and the time flew by, another acting masterclass, I couldn't take my eyes off the stage!

What musical soundtrack would you take to the Island? Evita... a bit like *JCS*, I know all the words (and I rarely know all the words to musicals I've been in!), love the story and the Latin beat in the music.

What theatrical luxury item would you take? A dresser but could I also smuggle in the whole hair and make-up team please??

What show would you love BLOC to do? They need to be big at the Hippo, so ones with lots of middle-aged feisty women please... *Gypsy, Hello Dolly, Guys & Dolls, Warpaint* and *Annie!*

Musical Firsts by Tom Creswick, Jessica Errington & Jessie Millson



Tom Creswick



Jessica Errington



Jessie Millson

<p>First musical you remember seeing?</p>	<p>Having seen so many musicals, I thought this would be a hard question. I'm lucky to have had the chance to watch both my Mum and Dad on stage many times, but the first show I remember seeing was Chitty Chitty Bang Bang at the Hippodrome with my Grandma. I remember being totally in awe of the special effects. Getting to perform in this show on the same stage many years later was a very special feeling.</p>	<p>One of the first stage musicals I saw was Phantom of the Opera at the Bristol Hippodrome. As the music started, I was mesmerised. I think I held my breath and didn't move till it had finished. My mind was blown! I want to be on stage too!</p> <p>Film My Fair Lady which is still one of my favourites and I'm obsessed with Disney!!</p> <p>It's all about the song for me.</p>	<p>My first memory of a musical involves me having slept through a large amount of Mary Poppins when I was just three years old.</p> <p>We were sitting on seats in the front row of the circle and I woke up just as she flew past me!</p> <p>I obviously squealed with delight as she looked down and winked at me.</p>
<p>First musical that made you want to take to the stage or work backstage?</p>	<p>As per above, it wasn't really a specific show that made me want to act... I just had no choice!</p> <p>I joined the junior section of my parents' Operatic Society in Weston aged five and have been in at least two shows every year since!</p>	<p>All of them! As soon as that curtain goes up, I'm there on stage with them! I did a lot of dancing, mainly ballet and school performances, way back when. Musical theatre has always been a passion that I have only dreamed of as an adult.</p> <p>Watching My Fair Lady made me yearn to be on stage even more. I am very late to the game, but am determined to learn and be the best I can be.</p>	<p>Waitress certainly confirmed my wish to take to the stage. I had never seen such a natural performance in a musical and desperately wanted to do this myself one day. I was lucky to get cast as Jenna in a little production the following year. I think the need for an audience had always been there, but this was the first time I went "Yep, I'd like to do this forever please."</p>
<p>First musical audition or technical experience?</p>	<p>I wouldn't count my years as a junior member as auditions, as it was usually a case of "stand there and sing a line" and I was in the show. My hardest and most nerve-racking audition was for the part of Edgar or The Boy in Ragtime at the Playhouse in Weston. I'd got down to the final two boys, got called back for a recall and after a long night of singing got told there and then, next to the boy who didn't get the part. I found this very hard as I was still quite young!</p>	<p>School production of The Wiz at the age of 14 and I was cast as Dorothy.</p> <p>I auditioned for BAOS (ssshhhhhh) in 2018 but it wasn't meant to be...</p> <p>I had no idea what I was doing so experience was needed. And everything happens for a reason. I looked closer to home, found Wells Little Theatre and it has changed my life.</p> <p>I auditioned for BLOC in March 2020, success!! And then a pandemic swept in and crushed my dreams.</p>	<p>I did youth theatre and a couple of drama school auditions. I'm currently at University of Bristol and am extremely involved in both writing and acting for theatre there, so I'm actually getting used to (even enjoying?) auditioning.</p>

Tom Creswick
Jessica Errington
Jessie Millson

<p>First role you had in a musical either onstage or backstage?</p>	<p>I played many parts as a youngster, such as Horton the Elephant in Seussical and the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, but my first “grown up” part came when I was still very young, playing Colin Craven in The Secret Garden at the Playhouse. My dad also played my father in this.</p> <p>I'll also give a shout-out to my first show in Bristol which was with BAOS Youth, where I played Gavroche in Les Mis.</p>	<p>Dorothy in The Wiz at 14.</p> <p>First proper musical on a theatre stage as an adult was in my very first show in Spring 2019, as Hodel in Fiddler on the Roof.</p> <p>This show will stay in my heart forever. What an experience. I was now hooked forever!!</p> <p>I was then a squirrel in Wind in the Willows at Christmas that same year.</p> <p>Then everything shut down!</p>	<p>I was three when I was in my first musical. I played Toto in The Wizard of Oz in a costume made by my mother. I had lost a little brown ballet shoe and was therefore late for a dance. When I entered the stage I saw there was no space for me in the line! I spent the whole song politely trying to find gaps and, right at the end of the song, I nudged my way into the line and got a cheer from the audience :)</p>
<p>First musical personality you admired?</p>	<p>Michael Ball. I was introduced to some quite classical musicals from a very young age such as Aspects of Love and Carousel, but his performance of Marius in Les Miserables has stuck with me from the minute I first heard it.</p>	<p>Watching Gary Wilmot in My Fair Lady melted my heart. There is SO much talent out there.</p>	<p>I mean... Andrews will have to be mentioned. Andrews will always have to be mentioned. I also do really love Jeremy Jordan and Sierra Boggess.</p>
<p>First impressions of BLOC?</p>	<p>I love BLOC so am super grateful to be accepted in again. I watched Fiddler and I was amazed at how professional it was. My first BLOC show was My Fair Lady and although I find the musical painfully boring, it was so much fun being in the dressing rooms and backstage with the rest of the cast. Chitty was an amazing show. I enjoyed pushing my dancing limits and getting my first couple of lines on the Hippodrome stage as a soldier!</p>	<p>A very welcoming and friendly bunch. We met over Zoom calls, Zoom quiz nights, BLOC's 'Light' choir (which I have watched 1000 times!!) and then the Christmas Carol Service in person. I pushed myself to get involved and I was welcomed and included with open arms.</p>	<p>The biscuits disappeared in the correct order at the first meet, so I instantly like you all!</p>
<p>First Choice - if you could choose any role in any show?</p>	<p>Impossible question! I'm lucky I've ticked one off the list, Seymour in Little Shop of Horrors. I'd love to play Billy in Anything Goes, Marius in Les Mis, Chris in Miss Saigon or Elder Price in Book of Mormon!</p>	<p>Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady, Bonnie in Bonnie and Clyde, Éponine in Les Mis... And any Disney princess!! Ooooh and an elf in Elf -The Musical, tick! Whoop whoop!!</p>	<p>The dream is to be Millie in Thoroughly Modern Millie or Katherine in Newsies. Both characters are tapping girl bosses so why not!</p>

View from The Royal Box (a.k.a. Ian Taylor's sofa)



A couple of weeks ago I attended a double header at the National Theatre for the first time in ages. I saw a matinee of **Jack Absolute Flies Again** and an evening performance of **Much Ado About Nothing**. Both were delightful in their own way and complemented each other beautifully.

JACK ABSOLUTE FLIES AGAIN (Olivier Theatre) by Richard Bean and Oliver Chris, really did take flight. Delayed due to the pandemic, this re-write of Sheridan's **The Rivals** — relocated to wartime West Sussex in 1940 as the Battle of Britain begins to rage, proved to be a comic delight, driven by wonderfully engaging performances all around. The updates worked well, with nods to the Restoration comedy source material. It was a bit like 'Carry On Up the Air

Force' with nods, winks, double meanings, mistaken identity and hysterical laughter.

The large company had strength, depth and brilliant comic timing. Peter Forbes gave an almost show-stealing performance as the army father full of bluster and Laurie Davidson in the title role cleverly captured the stiff upper lip Englishness and the image of the British hero.

The afternoon belonged to one person though, Caroline Quentin's outstanding tour-de-force (or tour-de-farce) as Mrs. Malaprop. She got away with saying absolutely anything. Her addresses and asides to the audience and hilariously mangled words had me aching with laughter. I also loved the maid Lucy, Kerry Howard striding across the huge stage declaiming, "I'm a dramatic device!"

Emily Bruns's production was beautiful, and the design was glorious, including projected air battles staged above our heads in the Olivier. There was a roof-raising dance in Act Two, and then a poignant change of tone, which the company handled very well. It was just what I, and the audience, needed, a rollicking good time at the theatre. Recommended.



MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (Lyttleton Theatre) was a terrific night out. Transplanted to the gorgeous surroundings of the Hotel Messina on the Italian Riviera in the 1930's this was a hugely enjoyable interpretation of Shakespeare's comedy. Just like its neighbour in the Olivier, it's a real crowd pleaser.

The revolving and multi-faceted set was simply lovely. A two-storey building doubled as hotel lobby, bar and beach house. The upper level (when it wasn't housing a swing band who played, sang and danced up a storm), became a range of different bedroom suites. The costumes were high end 1930's glamour. A visual treat.

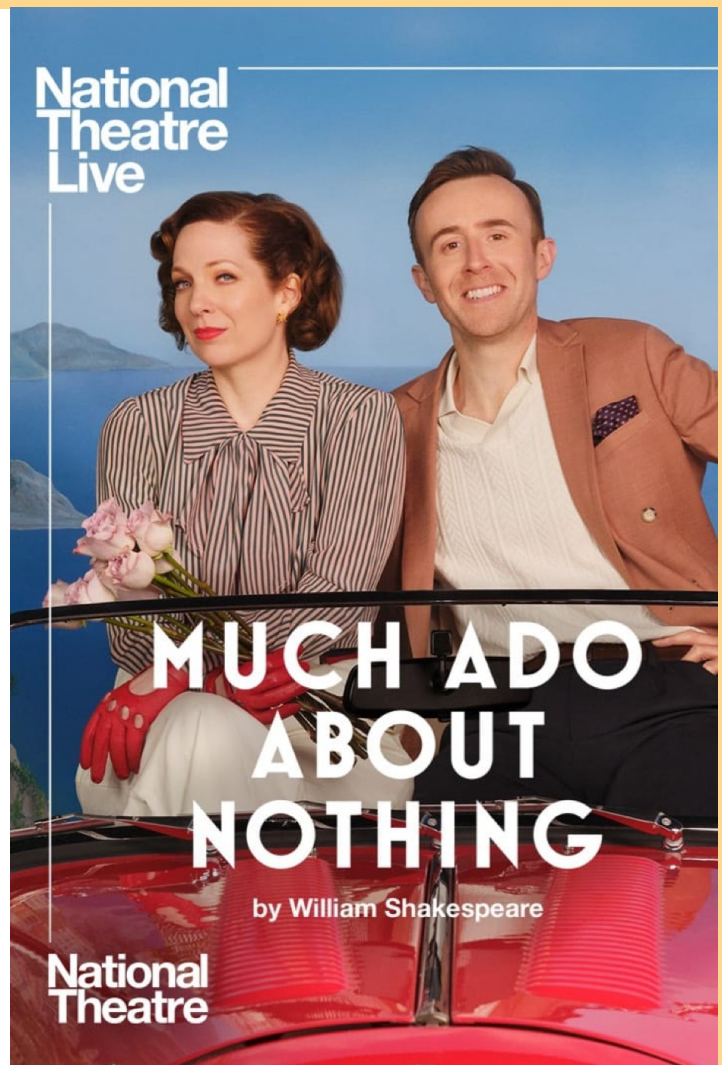
As the play progressed, the large and absolutely marvellous ensemble cast, taught us that a war had been won and we were invited to a wedding, a funeral and a masked ball. There were romantic trysts, secret plots, heartbreak and slapstick comedy. Ultimately, love conquered all and everyone had a jolly old time.

John Heffernan and Katherine Parkinson played the warring lovers Benedick and Beatrice. Parkinson played Beatrice with a great deal of pathos which meant that the comedy, when it came, felt forced at times. She was much better in the latter stages of the play when the emotional drama and slapstick comedy came crashing together. Heffernan's brilliant Benedick was the stand-out performance of the evening – he had perfect comic timing. His concealment in an ice cream trolley while eavesdropping on his friends, could have been OTT. But his emergence, covered in ice cream and chocolate hundreds-and-thousands drew big laughs from the audience. His speech denouncing marriage was a comic delight.

The intensely passionate young lovers Hero and Claudio were also a joy to behold and were played expertly by Eeben Figueiredo and Ioanna Kimbrook.

*"Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never".*

To modern eyes in the 'Me Too' era, the plot (men wielding power over women, men questioning female fidelity, misogyny and philandering males) could make for uncomfortable viewing. I still cannot fathom for the life of me, why Hero would agree to marry Claudio after the shocking way he



treated her throughout.

This conversation continued in the bar afterwards with Dame Faye Banks, her 'boy' and my hubbie. We all had to remind ourselves that this was a 500-year-old play!

The National Theatre is on cracking form and these two fizzy and funny productions deserve to be big summer hits. They're both being broadcast in the cinema as part of the NT Live project, so if you can't get to London to see them on stage, get thee to a picture house, you timorous poltroons!

Until next time.

Ian xx



Meet the Hippodrome Staff:
Jenny Martin,
Communications Manager



BLOC's long-standing relationship with The Hippodrome is one we want to continue to build on, so we thought it would be helpful if our readers found about more about the people who work there and who are so helpful to BLOC in choosing, promoting and staging our shows. In the last edition we met Charlotte Fortt, the theatre's Marketing Manager, and now we meet her colleague Jenny Martin, the Hippodrome's Communications Manager. Phil Hallworth chatted to her about her role and her interests.

Q. What does your job involve and how does it differ to Charlotte's?

A. Whilst Charlotte deals with all the paid-for marketing and advertising, I am responsible for all the non-budgeted stuff - including radio, tv and press relations. We work closely together to understand the shows we are selling and to ensure a consistent

approach to campaigns. I also deal with crisis management, for example recently when we have had to cancel performances due to the pandemic or storms.

Q. How does the public generally respond to cancellations?

A. It varies. Most people don't understand that the theatre doesn't actually own the shows and that decisions (such as to cancel or not) are usually down to the Producers. But generally speaking, people were very understanding when a show gets cancelled, in particular if it is down to Covid. But thankfully (even with Covid) it is very rare for us to have to cancel a show completely.

Q. How long have you been working at Hippodrome and what were you doing before that?

A. I previously worked in retail, but that was really just a job to pay the bills! I started here in 2013 as a Casual Marketing Assistant - helping with posters, flyers, promotional events and various other odd jobs! Then I worked in the Groups and Access department and became Marketing Assistant (I also picked up the occasional Box Office shift!). Then in 2018 I left for a couple of years before returning in 2021 as the Communications Manager. I love working here, hopefully I'll stay at the Hippodrome now until the bitter end!

Q. Is theatre a passion as well as a job?

A. It is definitely a strong passion for me. I have been interested in theatre ever since I was a child. Since the age of 10 I was in all the theatre clubs and performed in all of my schools plays and musicals. I studied Theatre and Performance at Falmouth University in 2010 and graduated in 2013, so I was very lucky to get a job at The Bristol Hippodrome so quickly after finishing my degree.

Q. How much a part of a Hippodrome show are you able to feel, being on the admin side of things?

A. I personally feel more connected to a show when I get to do a big Comms campaign with plenty of PR events, radio interviews and TV coverage. This is because I'll get to meet more of the company members and cast.

Q. How has theatre marketing changed in recent years?

A. The switch to digital is obviously the biggest change. When I started, there was so much physical print and lots of time spent flyering in shopping malls and being on the road with our roving box office. There is still some print obviously, but most people don't want to see us using paper so much and we happy to be cutting down to help the environment. Also, the process of writing, approving, printing and distributing print is very time-consuming. Whereas online content can reach thousands with just the click of a button. Plus it's more cost effective and kind to the environment. More people are using Facebook and other social media platforms now due to the pandemic and that is certainly helping us with our digital marketing. There is a constant need to stay on trend though – for example we've recently started a TikTok page, and I've started adding more and more Instagram Influencers to my press list.

Q. Have audiences changed since theatres re-opened?

A. There still seems to be a lack of confidence amongst some of our older audiences, but they are starting to trickle back. However, most of our audience members just seem overjoyed to be back at the theatre and enjoying live entertainment.

Q. *Elf* is obviously selling remarkably well – why do you think that is?

A. I think it's a combination of the power of social media and the pull of *Elf*. People just love the film – myself included! We've also never had *Elf* at our theatre before, so it offers something fresh and new for our audiences.

Q. Your favourite musical and is there a role you'd love to play?

A. Favourite musical? There is so many but I have a special place in my heart for *Cats*! It was the first musical I ever saw and when I was a child my mum made me a cat costume and I'd spend hours forcing my family to watch me sing and dance along to video, trying to be every character (oh dear!). And no, there is no video evidence of

this exists! (Thank goodness!)

There are lots of roles I'd love to play for different reasons. I loved playing Miranda in *Return to the Forbidden Planet* years ago and would love to have a go at Betty Rizzo in *Grease* or a gender-switched Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show*!

Q. Finally, what's been the best thing so far about working at the Hippodrome?

A. It sounds cheesy but it's like a family at The Hippodrome. I just love it here. My colleagues are so friendly and supportive, and I can honestly say I really enjoy the work. Being part of the return after Covid was very special. That first night of *Beauty and the Beast* was very emotional and I'm sure we'll all be talking about it for years to come.



**THE INTERVAL
★ IS OVER ★**
Welcome Back

THE BRISTOL
HIPPODROME 25.08.21 happydonut

Download & Tag your photos at facebook.com/BristolHippodrome
Use our event hashtag when sharing your images #BackAtTheHippo

Life's the pits!
*by Harry Haden-Brown
and Alex Turasiewicz*



Harry Haden-Brown was brought in by Matthew Ramplin to be assistant MD for BLOC's production of ***Sunset Boulevard***. The following year he was appointed to be MD for BLOC's production of ***Fiddler on the Roof***. It was always Harry's intention to be a full time MD and recently he came back to Bristol with the show ***Bedknobs and Broomsticks*** at The Hippodrome where he had last been with ***Fiddler***. This seemed an ideal time to talk to him and the way his career had gone since working with BLOC both on a new show and also an established show such as ***Phantom of the Opera***.

ALEX: The last time you were in Bristol, you came with ***Bedknobs and Broomsticks***. What was it like working on a new show?

HARRY: You're creating something that doesn't have any previous productions to reference. You can't listen to a cast

recording on Spotify or watch it online, and you've not heard most of the songs before. It's awesome to be working on a completely new production although the stage show is based on the original Disney 1971 movie. You're taking something that's already relatively famous but will be adapted for a whole different medium and audience. We had the incredible Simon Hale who orchestrated 'Writing's on the Wall' and just won a Tony for 'Girl from the North Country' creating bespoke orchestrations for us and responding to what we were creating in the room, we had Jason Robert Brown's Musical Supervisor, Tom Murray over from America, and the writers Neil Bartram and Brian Hill in the room. They're changing everything as you go along from underscore, to entirely new songs and dialogue. That's something special as once a show is 'locked' or the rights released, you're not really supposed to change much - let alone have the original writers approving and making those decisions!

ALEX: Do you have any input in any of that?

HARRY: In short, Yes! My principal role was Children's MD and Cover Conductor - teaching and coaching our junior cast and conducting the show every now and then. However even if you're 'just' the pianist in the room, you still have an input. If you play something at a certain speed or make a musical choice in rehearsals, the composer hears it and they might use that interpretation in the final production. Those tiny and seemingly insignificant decisions you make in the room (often on the fly or even by accident) with the cast and the band may inevitably end up in the show.

ALEX: An example of that?

HARRY: There are a few bars here and there where I had to improvise some 'magic spell' or 'spell goes wrong' music - that ended up being orchestrated and improved and is now a part of the score! The rehearsal pianist will often write cues in their score during rehearsals so that when the choreographer goes: 'We're going from this moment you know exactly where to start. One of the things I scribbled down was "Rob's Bush", simply because that's when Rob pushes the bush on! The person typesetting it all for future productions sees that scribble - and it makes it to the

final print! When BLOC or any other group puts on **Bedknobs and Broomsticks** in years to come - I love that "Robs Bush" may cause confusion. You now know what it means and that it isn't some kind of bizarre musical instruction!

ALEX: How did the show develop and does it change a lot?

HARRY: The show had already been through five or six years of development before it got to the production stage including readings and workshops in America and England. Lots of changes get thrown in right up to opening night and beyond. We were sight reading the bows which only appeared a few days into the run! You get in ten minutes before the show and the MD says "By the way, we've got some extra music at the end. It goes a bit like this. Let's see what happens." You turn the page and hope for the best! Our orchestrator had a lot of fun with the bows and we had various instructions in our music such as: "Good luck!" And "Bet you wish you'd practiced your ABRSM scales now!"

ALEX: What's the atmosphere like as you getting nearer and nearer to the technical and then the actual previews?



HARRY: It's important everyone is relaxed. It's always going to be stressful and there are always going to be changes and mistakes - so the best way to keep it as smooth as possible is for everyone to keep their wits about them and stay chilled - even when it's all going wrong!

ALEX: Do people grab you and say, "can you just go through this" at the last minute? Is it much like we do it at BLOC?

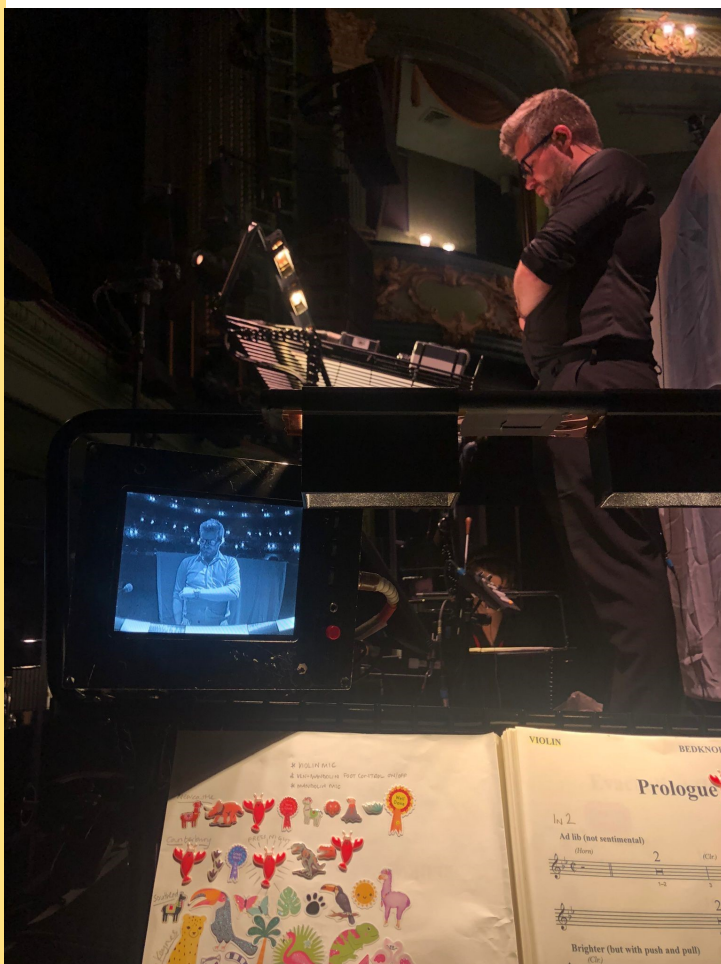
HARRY: I think it's a pretty similar process! Someone will come over and they go "I need to hear this harmony and can you record it on my phone?" It feels like there's never *quite* enough time, but it always works out in the end. The main difference is the rehearsal process is full time but condensed into a few weeks as opposed to several months.

ALEX: How do you arrange digs? Do you love each other by the end or are glad to part company?

HARRY: In general, I stayed with the orchestra, but occasionally I'd live with several of the cast members which was often chaos but great fun. Everyone's got different priorities with their accommodation whether its budget, location, quality, or how many people are sharing each room...!

ALEX: What was it like doing eight shows a week for nine months of the same show? Maybe 250 performances.

HARRY: I don't think I was bored even after 250 shows. I was still really enjoying playing. I think you're so relaxed because you know it inside out. So, you just are able to do a really good job and occasionally



the shows just fly by. You're not worrying about getting it right or worried about playing wrong notes you're just thinking about keeping it musical. And, of course, you thoroughly enjoy hearing the moments where things don't quite go to plan on stage...

ALEX : I know it's your job, but how do you keep it at top level?

HARRY: It's never going to be perfect but you always strive for perfection. You also have a lot of fun with the people in the pit. After a while you don't need to concentrate on the notes so much so you might be waving at somebody across the orchestra, dancing along to a number, or miming to the words that are going on stage. There might be innuendos or rituals that everyone in the band joins in on. And we definitely benefit from the fact that the audience can't see us! As long as it doesn't affect the music, there's a fairly relaxed attitude to this - as it keeps the playing fresh. I think it's a shame that often the musicians won't ever watch the show they are accompanying. It's really important because when you're playing the music, if you know that something on stage is magical you may well play

differently. Connecting the drama on stage to the disconnected musicians in the pit is really the most important part of being a conductor. If you're doing a short run, it's not so bad because the players are probably excited and nervous and the week is enough to just get it right. But if they're six months in and they don't have any idea what goes on stage, they might lose that passion!

ALEX: So how did you get from **Sunset Boulevard** to where you are today?

HARRY: Being Matt Ramplin's assistant on **Sunset**, I gained lots of connections to other MDs in the industry. I started working in London on smaller fringe shows, connecting with casting directors, musicians and producers and LOTS of playing for auditions. You just slowly work your way up gaining experience and networking as you go.

ALEX: There's lots of potential MD's - so how did you get the gigs?

HARRY: Sending lots of emails, putting yourself in the right place at the right time, Oh - and turning up early, prepared, and being a nice person!





ALEX: What about the pantomime seasons you did? Did they help to lead on to where you are today?

HARRY: Pantomime is a completely a different beast. You are learning how to work professionally in a short time frame, you have to create things on the spot and you're effectively writing a new show every year. Also, you have to be a bit of a mind reader when the Director goes: "We need the climbing into the washing machine music" and you're expected to know exactly what that means.

ALEX: And what does it mean?

HARRY: It ended up being a 'Sing, Sing, Sing' style drum solo. And then 'climbing back out naked' music of course turned out to be 'The Stripper' theme. The Director doesn't necessarily know what they want but you're expected to provide it anyway, on cue!

ALEX: Other key shows?

HARRY: There was a show at the Union Theatre in Southwark called **Midnight** with actor-musicians. I really enjoyed that. That was a fairly new musical but we developed the actor-musician element

of it. When you're working on something smaller, you have a much more creative input than when you work on something more established. On the fringe you are the arranger, the orchestrator, you're printing and taping the parts, you're rehearsing, you're doing everything, which is exciting but hard work. Actually, it seems the bigger the production, the less you do. You learn most of your skills doing the small things.

ALEX: As COVID struck, you were working on **The Phantom of the Opera**. What was it like working on a really established show? I know you enjoyed the fact you were conducting with the stick. How did you get this position?

HARRY: I got the job because the MD had put me forward for the interview after seeing me perform in a small production of **Side by Side** at the Bristol Hippodrome! It was that strange combination of luck and putting yourself in the right place at the right time. All the productions and work I had done prior to the interview set me up well. Lots of 'stick' conducting with BLOC, Ivy Arts, Bristol Uni and Bridgwater College where I was lucky enough to be given large orchestras. People want you on their creative team

if you're good enough at what you do and you're easy to work with.

ALEX: Easy doesn't just mean you're a pushover.

HARRY: No - I think it means you get the job done but using the path of least resistance - and with a smile on your face!

ALEX: What was it like working on *Phantom*?

HARRY: It still feels like 'the show that got away' as we were all having an incredible time. The creative team and cast were experts at their craft and super friendly. The producers and writers who perhaps come with a reputation were really nice and passionate about the show when they were in the room. Cameron Mackintosh was in quite a lot of the rehearsals and would always have an opinion on every fine detail from the lighting to the wigs to the playing of the piano in rehearsals. The director had come over from the Broadway 'original' and was creating a new production. So even though it was the same music, script, set and chandelier, they were trying to freshen the production up. That meant he gave everyone a lot of freedom. The Musical Supervisor re-energized the music and although some of the cast had been in previous productions they were finding new and exciting things to explore. Our touring production then transferred into the West End as they were so pleased with it - and Andrew was particularly happy with the phenomenal sound made by a much smaller orchestra (a discussion on which to be had on another day!).



ALEX: What was it like when you were told you were the Assistant MD and. how exciting for you was knowing that you were going to conduct a 14-piece orchestra, which I believe is big for a touring production.

HARRY: At first, I was pretty nervous and I actually told them I didn't think I was quite ready! After a few phone calls I eventually took the plunge but it was quite a big step from being paid £50 a week or so on Fringe productions (one of which where my dressing room and props cupboard was a toilet...!) to a show that's been around for over 30 years.

ALEX: So, what was it like the night you actually had to conduct for the first time?

HARRY: That happens surprisingly early on in the run. They want you to be set up in case of an emergency. They don't change things up until press night so often the first time you conduct is the afternoon after the press night where free drinks are usually provided... also the first date the band can have replacements 'deps' in. I think my first conduct I only had seven of the original players and the other half of the band were playing for the first time. However, you benefit from this as they're either concentrating hard as it's their first show - or being particularly well behaved if they're a little sensitive from the night before!

ALEX: So, what do you bring to it when you conduct?

HARRY: Ideally, an audience don't notice any changes, but realistically it will be different although you're not making creative choices. You're the Assistant and you're just taking care of the show for the MD whilst they're away - or doing a show watch to check how it sounds from the audience.

ALEX: What's it like for you with the band? Do you command the same respect?

HARRY: I think you end up in quite a good position because you're part of the band as opposed to their boss. You never have to be bad cop! People are going to be excited and curious about how you might be different. People tend to follow a lot more rather than just playing what they already know which can be fairly

brutal on your first few times. If you get it wrong, they might save you or they might follow you religiously - but in general it's a very supportive environment as everyone wants it to go well. The cast is always excited to see someone different on the monitor. It's important to have a good rapport and relationship with the musicians and the cast too. Before I conducted the show I'd always go and speak to the lead performers. In **Phantom** I'd go and speak to the Phantom and Christine and ask them how they were. Then at the interval I'd check up and say I hope everything was okay. Was there anything that was wildly unexpected? Whether or not it was true they'd always say: 'It's sounding great!'. If you're conducting you normally take the warm up so people can connect with you on the day. Someone might say 'My voice is tired today so I'd like to take the song faster or slower and the warm up is when that or any other changes are communicated.

ALEX: You had conducted your first show, you had a contract for a long tour and then Covid struck - what happened then?

To be continued in the next issue!



There is Nothing Like a Dame - Nic Gibney and Courtney Jackson *In conversation with Jalelaah Galbraith.*

Last Christmas, veteran performer Christopher Biggins was quoted as saying "The day will come when they'll say a Dame... will have to be played by a woman." which he predicts will be a result of today's 'Cancel Culture'.

I spoke to our very own BLOC Dames, dancer and choreographer Courtney Jackson and Nic Gibney, BLOC's Buddy in *Elf*, about this prediction and their experiences of working in the British tradition of Panto.

"Gender swapping [onstage] has been happening since Greek theatre" points out Nic "and throughout history, especially in Shakespearian theatre and in Panto, there is also a reverse of the sexes with women playing Princes".

Pantomime is a style of musical comedy created as family entertainment and originated in England; it includes singing, dancing, slapstick comedy and allows audiences to join in with key moments. Casting has always been creative not only with the Dame and the Prince but also the Fairy Godmother has been played by men as well as women.

Dick Whittington, as well as being Courtney's favourite Panto, is also the first he ever 'saw', on a home video VHS of a local production that he became obsessed with and admits he would watch up to three times a day every day as a four-year-old, copying the routines and dialogue. "I don't remember seeing the Dame and thinking that is a man playing a woman" Courtney explains when asked what stood out to him about the role, "it was the performance and the comedy I



remember and loved and wanted to copy. I wanted to be Sarah the Cook".

I asked Courtney when did he first decide he wanted to perform as a Dame and he immediately answered by showing me a photo on his phone that his mum had recently found which explains it all. Five-year-old Courtney in a homemade Dame costume he created himself, complete with sellotaped toy breakfast food on the skirt and a Southmead charity shop wig sourced by his Nan. We've included the photo here as it is too cute not to share.

Nic's earliest memories of Panto, as for many of us, was watching live productions at Christmas, for him in Woking and Wimbledon. Nic didn't think of it as a potential career path until he was already out of training and working professionally in musical theatre. Now it is guaranteed work for him every year and he absolutely loves it and hopes to continue for many more years to come. It is an art form that uses all his talents and gives him the opportunity to entertain and connect with all ages onstage.

Nic and Courtney have both helped to enhance the reputation of Panto Dames over the last couple of months with their act, along with six other Dames, reaching the Semi Finals of Britain's Got Talent as 'Damnation'. Many acts on BGT could be easily swapped with those on America's Got Talent or Australia's Got Talent such as magicians, performing animals or acrobatics but this act was an absolute representation of British heritage and humour at its best.

So, what it is about the Dame that audiences love? Nic feels the audience responds positively to the Dame, regardless of the sex of the performer as it is a style of performance all of its own. Nic's Dame and Ugly Sister characters are always performed with a broad Bristolian accent which he believes connects to the audience. Courtney describes the Dame's role as that of a storyteller



and to make the audience feel safe, there is no punching down in the comedy of a Dame and this allows the audience to relate as it will remind them of 'Aunt Ethel or Aunt Mildred' and people they've met in life. "It's familiarity" in Nic's eyes that helps the comedy. Courtney also notes that "Children enjoy the silliness and over the top persona" and adults can appreciate the one liner, innuendos and the rapport created from getting to break the fourth wall and boo at them and react to their storylines. "It is a breather for the audience to have a laugh and relax" adds Nic.

Drag performers playing Dames is another potential addition to Panto casting; another type of performance and entertainment that Courtney knows very well as his alter ego Miss Courtney will prove. His first performance as a Dame was aged 14 years old as a Year 9 student at Bristol Cathedral School when he was raising money for his school choir's trip to America. Courtney wrote, cast and starred in Aladdin, playing Widow Twankey and he never looked back. Although Drag and Dame work usually performs for a different age of audience and he adapts his persona accordingly when it comes to innuendo and language, Courtney sees each art the same which is to "make them laugh" and this is one of his favourite parts of performing in Panto. "It's like a drug, always being the funniest one onstage and connecting to the audience. I also love the campness of the Dame and Panto itself".

Nic believes as we all get older, we need to listen to the next generation to gauge the tone of sensibility and understands that things have to evolve to survive and Panto is no different. However he also believes with theatre it is about who is right for the role and therefore with Panto Dames that might be man, woman, drag act; it is the performer who is best for the character.

It could be therefore that Panto Dames will be played by women not because they "have" to be for political correctness" but because they can be, as the genre adapts and progresses into the future along with men playing Princes and Drag Queens playing villains and Dames. Panto is for everyone both in the audience and onstage. Some might say "oh no it isn't" but from talking to Nic and Courtney, they say 'oh yes, it is'!

Editor's Note: Many congratulations to Nic Gibney, together with Duncan Burt on being awarded Best Ugly Sisters by the UK Pantomime Association Awards.



Is it time BLOC woke up? by Alex Turasiewicz

'It's complicated.' So wrote Steven Spielberg discussing the various issues he faced in creating his new version of **West Side Story**. Some of these included discriminatory hiring practices, historical and cultural representational practices, appropriation and mis-appropriation, asking the question how real or unreal art should be. Within this mix came consideration of sexual identity and communities being able to identify themselves in the portrayals of the characters and not just seeing stereotypes.

BLOC performs musicals which are frequently derided by many people for being rather trivial, but they also contain serious questions on which an audience can reflect and in the 2020's these questions of appropriateness have to be considered alongside the ones of whether the show is marketable and appropriate for the company.

With this in mind I have looked at some of the shows BLOC has happily done during its 85 years, but might pause to do again as it moves towards its 100th year.

Opulent, visually stunning – these were some of the accolades that John Cousins' last production of **The King and I** received. BLOC has done the show three times now 1974 when Brian Harding played the King of Siam, 1998 when the King was played by O J Lynch and 2011 when Sid Vardakis played the part. To the writer's knowledge none of these have ancestral connections to Thailand and BLOC was totally happy for them to play the part. At the same time the Company had a mass sun tanning session to look as if we came from the country. Eleven years on would **The King and I** still be a choice of show for BLOC and if yes how would it be approached now?

Showboat was performed by BLOC in 1975 and many male members of the company 'blacked up' to play the negro cotton pickers and this seemed to be perfectly acceptable at the time as the BBC weekly screened The Black and White Minstrel Show. This would not be contemplated now although it is still considered a classic show by many. However, Daniel Evans who directed the last professional revival of the show feels it's important to put these shows in front of audiences so they can reflect on the issues contained in them. [Interestingly **Porgy and Bess** contractually can only be played by an all-black cast so most amateur groups have not been able to perform the show]. Could BLOC do a radical production where it was played by a cast that didn't 'black -up' but identified as the black characters? How will the am-dram world try to approach these works in future?

Is it a piece that is demeaning to the original culture or is it, as Daniel Evans feels, "a piece of daring piece of political theatre?" BLOC has been innovative as in **Sister Act** with a white actor playing the lead ethnic role and essentially a white cast playing all the ethnic roles, and this seemed equally acceptable to the company and audience alike.

Equally challenging are gender issues as portrayed in musicals. **Kiss Me, Kate** - BLOC 1990 and planned for 2020 - is based on The Taming of the Shrew, which is now seen as a problematic Shakespeare play, constantly reinvented by Directors. [There are scholars who feel that Shakespeare far from endorsing the mores of the time was himself being political and actually asking his audience to question them.] Although described as a comedy it still doesn't change the fact that the 'hero' virtually beats and starves Kate into submission. The recent short-lived Broadway revival, despite having new updates by Amanda Green, softened the violence but didn't really ameliorate it. As to **Carousel** - BLOC 1986 - we have a 'wife-beating' hero who seems to get excused by "he hit me but it felt like a kiss" scenario and the hint of redemption at the end of the musical. The recent revival in Regent's Park attempted to address these issues but with mixed critical response. Similar problems occur with **My Fair Lady** when again much critical response has focused on the treatment of Eliza, especially at the end of the show.

Professional productions often employ writers to write new lyrics or restructure shows but do such rewrites really fix their limitations? Then of course there are shows that have specific racial characters often played to stereotypes. The Chinese characters in **Anything Goes**, the pianist in **Barnum** – Frome recently cancelled its production because they couldn't get a black pianist. Are we really comfortable now with who and how we portray Fagin in **Oliver!** - BLOC 1982/2006, or even **Fiddler on The Roof** - BLOC 1972/1981/1999/2016? A great company show with a universal story but told through a very specific religious group with certain characteristics that are often imitated in productions. Would BLOC doing this show now be challenged with cultural appropriation?

Daniel Evans feels these are great shows with amazing music that "give people a great night out and makes them think about the world they are living in." How will BLOC approach these shows and others in the future? Will our choice of shows become more and more limited?

Does BLOC need to "wake up"?

As Steven Spielberg said: "It's complicated".

From the Wings...

This column provides details of newsworthy events within the BLOC family, and any other titbits of news we may come across.

Many congratulations to new member Tom Carpenter on his marriage to Kirsty on June 25th. And well done to the Brendan and the BLOC choir who performed fantastically at the service. Our Chairman was very grateful!

