

BLOC Bailiwick

Hello, we're back! Can you believe it's been two years since the last issue? So much we could talk about but let's keep it simple:

After six wonderful shows and a lot of heart and soul, Sue Donovan stepped down as Chairperson of BLOC Productions. I'm sure you'll all join with me in wishing Sue success in future endeavours (although she promises to still want to get involved as much as she can – she is already back as our Vice President and our NODA Long Service Awards Co-ordinator). At the 2019 AGM it was voted that Andrew Carpenter would take over as our new Chairperson and what a first year we had – with the great show of *BLOCBUSTERS* and the exciting upcoming *Kiss Me, Kate!*

Funnily enough, we haven't released an issue since our great success with *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!* What a wonderful show we had, and I think the crowds of people on their feet would agree. To add to this success, we won both the NODA Award for District 13 and the Rose Bowl for: Best Musical Production and we were also nominated for four other Rose Bowl Awards: Best Actress In A Musical (Grace Macdonald as Truly Scrumptious), two Best Supporting Actor In A Musical awards (Alex Milner and Peter Cottell as Boris and Goran respectively) and the Coup De Theatre Award (for the flying *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* car.) Congratulations to all involved and to all of our members and friends who were nominated or involved with other winning and nominated productions.

I'd love to thank Dominic Ammerlaan for the new layout on this latest issue – I'm sure you'll all agree it looks wonderful!

As a final note, after much deliberation, and with the recent news that I have received a place to study MA Acting at GSA (for which I'm very thankful to BLOC for their generous grant), I have decided this will be my last issue as the editor of the BLOC Bailiwick. With post graduate life taking more of my concentration, I feel I can't offer the same amount of time as I would strive to do in usual circumstances. I'm truly sad to step away as I have loved every moment of the BLOC Bailiwick's journey so far. From creating a simple word document with Alex way back in Spring 2017, to the last fun meeting I had with Alex, Anna, and Ewan. If you'll indulge me for a short paragraph, I'd like to share my gratitude to all who helped push the Bailiwick onwards, through proof reading, article writing, and those little moments where you'd tell us how much you valued it. I'd like to thank Ewan and Anna for all their hard work throughout and dealing with my weird obsession for every bit of punctuation. I'd also like to point out that Anna took our simple document and turned it into a publication that didn't look like a university essay – I always looked forward to seeing the latest design that she had created for us all. Finally, I'd love to say a huge thank you to Alex for inviting me to help conceive the BLOC Bailiwick with him. It was a very funny first meeting where we sat down to discuss this idea and we were brainstorming ideas for a publication title; I was scrolling through a thesaurus for a solid hour until I found Bailiwick and insisted on the name. Thank you, Alex, for your patience and for putting up with every weird decision and non-sensical conversation I had with you in developing what our readers hold in their hands now. (I'm saying this is it, but I'm sure I'll want to get involved again the second I can).

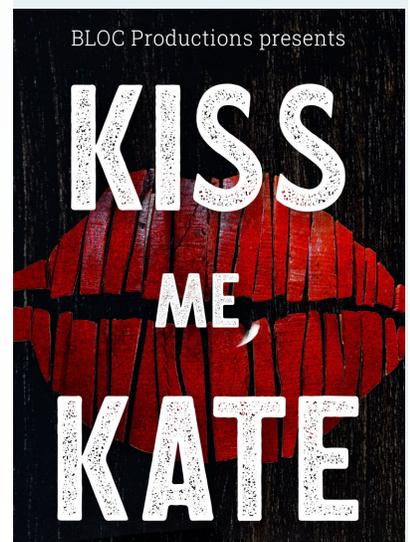
Looking to the present and future, thank you to Dom Ammerlaan, Andrew Carpenter, Kevin Clifton, Mark Collins, Sue Donovan, Philip Hallworth, Chris Hobbs, Stewart McPherson, Chris Parslow, Ewan Poole-Gleed, Scott St. Maryn, Anna Sutton, Alex Turasiewicz, and all of the wonderful children who were in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* for their contributions to this issue. If anyone is interested in writing an article, or even getting involved in the mighty team that is the BLOC Bailiwick, then please get in touch with us at bailiwick@blocproductions.co.uk as we would love to hear from you.

As always, and a final time from me, enjoy your read!



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Farewell to Sue!

What was your highlight of being Chairperson at BLOC Productions?

My highlights of being Chair...? There's just so many! I think, first of all, it would be seeing all the young members grow. I think being at the auditions with principal parts has got to be the best day every year. I loved encouraging people going for parts – that was good; and seeing people going for principal parts, who never had principal parts before. The joy of opening night - watching it all come together, especially watching Chitty fly for the very first time - I cried! There's just so many lovely memories – I think my favourite day is casting the principal parts though.

What do you think was the funniest thing in your time with BLOC Productions?

I can't think... It's sort of scary but it was so funny. When I was in *The Merry Widow*, which was a long time ago (probably talking thirty years or even longer than that), we all had to walk through this lovely archway and a gate... and we had to open the gate to go through. And everyone went through and then, when I went through, the gate came off in my hands and I was stuck in the middle of the stage with a gate! Just holding this gate. And the audience clapped... It was really funny but really scary at the same time because I just didn't know what to do with this gate. But there's been so many: when you had to roll balls across the stage and mine went straight down into the orchestra pit... they're really funny moments. And obviously fun backstage where you can just have a giggle. Those are moments that you just sort of pot and you just wish you could keep them forever and relive them when you get times in life when it's not as great, you know? You just want to relive those fun moments.

What is a show that you wish BLOC Productions could have done that they have never done?

West Side Story, because I love it. *Mary Poppins* I think is one as well – I just think it's a BLOC show. I think *Mary Poppins* is the one I'd have loved to have got for BLOC. But *West Side Story* is my ultimate favourite show, which we've never done, but it's never really been a BLOC show because you need to be twenty-five and under to be in it apart from a couple principal roles; so, the committee have never really gone with that show for that reason. *Phantom Of The Opera*, one day. Obviously, top of the list, has got to be *Les Miserables*. I rung every year to see if it's going to be released for amateurs so I just hope that when it does get released, if I'm 105 that somebody will just wheel me on so I can say "yeah, I was in *Les Mis*"!

What have you cherished most about being Chair?

I think, if I can just say this, I think when you meet young people especially like Evie, who played my daughter in *Fiddler On The Roof*, to see her playing a lead in *Footloose*. To see how she's blossomed into this fantastic young woman but still so so talented. It just warms the cockles of your heart and you just don't know where the future's going to go for some of these young people. There're so many joys. And obviously me and my family, I've got Katie, my niece – I see myself in Katie because I was in BLOC at her age. It's just so lovely for me because it's carrying on the singing - we'll always be part of BLOC.



Sue Donovan at Rosebowl

Special thanks to Stewart McPherson Photography for many of the photographs in this edition of Bailiwick

McPherson
PHOTOGRAPHY

Check out more of Stewart's work @
www.mcphersonphotography.co.uk



Andrew as Monsignor O'Hara

BLOC—The Past, Present and Future

By Andrew Carpenter

It is just over a year ago that I took over as Chair of BLOC Productions from Sue Donovan and I do not think anybody could have guessed then the trials and tribulations we are all having to contend with now! The world of amateur theatre has been decimated by the current coronavirus and I send my heartfelt best wishes to all members missing their passion right now. Obviously it was disappointing not to be able to perform at the Bristol Hippodrome last year, due to the extended run of *The Lion King*, and now in 2020 our production of *Kiss Me, Kate* has been postponed because the current social distancing rules have been extended. However, I like to take the positives out of every situation and as I outlined at our AGM in March your committee has been working tirelessly to interrogate our processes & procedures and roles & responsibilities to better support BLOC Productions and therefore our members. In my opening remarks as chair seventeen months ago I made several comments which I have pleasure in re-producing with an update provided in each case as follows:

My intention is to do the following during my tenure as chair of BLOC productions:

Build on the success of Sue's tenure as chair: This is being done through our interrogation of our processes & procedures and roles & responsibilities which form part of a Single Page Plan scheme to give BLOC Productions improved governance. In addition, we are seeking to forge closer links with the other Bristol amateur musical theatre groups to ensure we can support one another whenever and wherever possible.

What's On

(As known August 2020)

Copacabana – Bristol Amateur Operatic Society
30th March – 3rd April 2021

Titanic: The Musical – St. Mary's Players
6th – 10th April 2021

The Wedding Singer – Bristol Musical Theatre
28th April – 1st May 2021

Rent – Bristol Musical Comedy Club
4th – 8th May 2021

Made in Dagenham – Bridgwater Operatic Society
12th – 15th May 2021

The Wiz – BAOS Youth
2nd – 5th June 2021

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels – Worle Operatic and Dramatic Society
3rd – 5th June 2021

The Producers – Muses Theatrical Productions
29th June – 3rd July 2021

Kiss Me, Kate – BLOC Productions
28th September – 2nd October 2021

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang from the Kids!

"I've never done anything like *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* before so I thought I would be quite scared, but the team were like one big family helping and supporting each other all the way. It was a truly amazing experience being on the Hippodrome stage, something I will never forget. I'm still singing the songs now!" - Lily



"Gerri helped me face my longstanding fear of the Child Catcher. I met him face to face and, best of all, got to pull off his nose! Doing the rehearsals with all the cast made me feel like a real professional" - Jemima

Quickly understand the current issues and deliver solutions: This was carried out at my initial committee meeting in the form of a 'post-it' note exercise which eventually resulted in the Single Page Plan scheme previously mentioned. The issues were well known so our job was to set out a series of solutions which are now in place and being worked through in a systematic manner.

Provide structure, processes and leadership to drive the group forward to even greater heights: With regards to structure and processes, this is being achieved via our Single Page Plan scheme as previously mentioned. In terms of leadership, I will leave that for the members to decide!

To include more members in the day-to-day running of BLOC Productions without any politics (I am used to working with volunteers): As part of our revised processes & procedures, Pete Jones is leading on this front. We are amid compiling a skills matrix for all our members and once populated we will identify the 'gaps' and seek to fill them. Without a production in 2019 this was not identified as a priority. However, in particular I would like to welcome Kathie Cooke to our committee who has proved already since her appointment in March 2020 to be an asset.

"Respect the past. Enjoy the current. Look to the future."

To work with the new committee to ensure BLOC has a 'family' feel and is run by the members for the members: I'm delighted to report that this wish was very easy to achieve in that the committee immediately bought into my way of operating and we agreed we are "**A Production Company with Club feel**". More details on this may be found elsewhere within this Bailiwick publication.

The qualities I hope to bring to my time as chair include: I will let members comment on whether I've delivered on my promises but have to say the 'buy in' at the various meetings and activities I've attended has been first class and I'm still very excited about what is planned going forward.

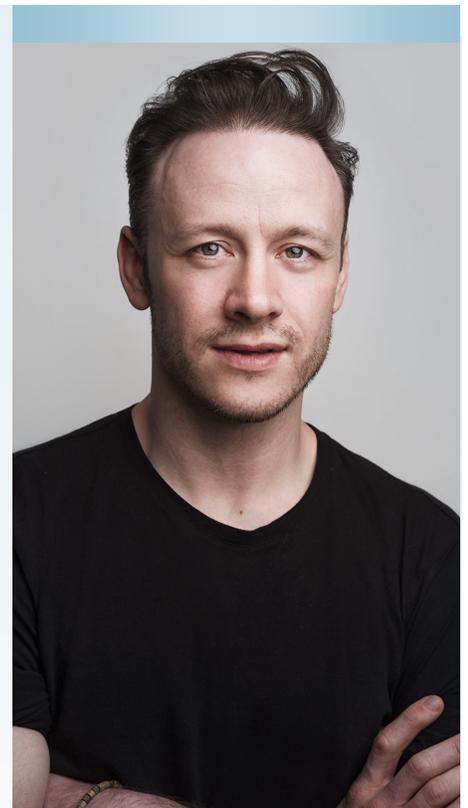
Energy. Enthusiasm. Passion for musical theatre: My philosophy which I intend to bring into my leadership of BLOC Productions. These three things have been at the heart of all our committee decisions and play a vital part in our Single Page Plan scheme. I have been particularly impressed with things like the John James Foundation Sing-along, the Patrons' Christmas Tea Party and the Carol Service amongst other things. We have a highly impressive committee that has been a joy and privilege to lead and this together with the talent and dedication of all members makes my role of chair very easy. Respect, Enjoyment and Forward Thinking are an integral part of everything we do.

RESPECT THE PAST. ENJOY THE CURRENT. LOOK TO THE FUTURE.

Our Clifton Bridge...

BLOC is delighted to welcome Kevin Clifton, a high-profile musical theatre personality, as our national ambassador. So far Kevin, as well as doing a most enjoyable and candid Q & A with members of the club recently, has agreed to host a dinner for potential sponsors, run a workshop for members and attend social events as and when available. We really look forward to welcoming Kevin into the BLOC family and having a mutually beneficial relationship for a long time to come:

Kevin is a world-class professional dancer, former youth world number one and four-time British Latin Champion, winning international open titles in numerous countries across the world. After making his West End musical theatre debut in 2010 in *Dirty Dancing*, Kevin was a principal dancer in Burn The Floor Dance Company for several years before going on to star in the 2020 UK *Burn The Floor Tour* alongside his sister, Joanne Clifton. Most recently, Kevin has starred in *The Wedding Singer* as Robbie Hart which played at Wembley Troubadour Park Theatre as well as starring in the 2019 West End production of *Rock of Ages* as Stacie Jaxx. Perhaps best known for being a professional dancer on *BBC's Strictly Come Dancing*, Kevin first appeared on the show in 2013 and is a five time finalist, going on to win the glitterball title alongside Stacey Dooley and was crowned *Strictly Champion* 2018. In 2019 Kevin was a judge on *All Star Musicals* (ITV) alongside Elaine Paige and Kristen Chenoweth.



The History of Bristol Light Opera Club 1976-1995

The next period of Bristol Light Opera Club's history is a period of change. A change in the style of shows; a change in length of productions; a change in the composition of members; a change in the range of activities; and, finally, a change of name.

Bristol Light Opera Club had originally been formed to perform Light Opera in contrast to other clubs who were performing musicals. However, the taste of Bristol Light Opera Club's audiences changed, and more and more musicals were presented. So, in 1976 an American musical, *Oklahoma!*, was chosen; followed by a light opera, Offenbach's *La Belle Helene* and then two more well-known musicals, *Gigi* and *The Sound of Music*. It became evident that it was the musicals that was attracting the larger audiences and the future direction of Bristol Light Opera Club became obvious. *The Sound of Music* in 1980 also marked another important change as The Hippodrome decided that the club would only be given the opportunity to perform for one week. Up till then, the club had been given the opportunity for thirteen performances (opening on the Tuesday and then running all week with only the one matinee on the Saturday and then starting on the Monday and running the whole of the next week too). Most parts were often double cast and so there were no understudies, and everyone got a chance to play their parts over the fortnight. The cast that opened the show didn't play the last night.



This gave a whole different buzz to the experience and the second week was invariably a bit of a breeze and one got a sense of what it would be like to do a long run. Also, it meant that covering became rewarding as, if there was an understudy, they would get at least two shows. It was the Hippodrome who introduced this change and, at the time,

it was meant to be temporary but we have never gone back to it.



STAR TRIO: Principal characters of *Guys and Dolls*, Chris Parslow, Marilyn Norton-Smith and Lucy Pope at the Hippodrome

SHOW TUNES UP FOR A HIT!

BRISTOL Light Opera Club has started rehearsals for its next blockbuster show.

Members are staging *Guys and Dolls* at the Hippodrome from October 24 to 28.

The company is hoping for another smash hit after a sell-out production last year.

Its production of 42nd Street was a huge success at the theatre and

By JEREMY TAYLOR, Showbiz Editor

played to packed houses every night.

Hippodrome spokeswoman Sarah Bennett-Milne said: "The show already looks set to be another sell-out."

Damon Runyon's musical features songs like *Luck Be A Lady*, *I've Never Been In Love Before* and *Sit Down Before and Sit Down You're Rocking The Boat*.



Following *The Sound of Music* there again was a mixture of Light Opera such as *The Merry Widow* and musicals *Oliver!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. At this time, there was also an interesting demand on the Technical Department as some shows had sets that could be hired in and for newer musicals the company had to design and build their own. Doing this for any stage is challenging but for a stage the size of the Bristol Hippodrome, the question of scale presented a whole new set of problems.

To celebrate its Jubilee, the club decided to return to its roots and presented *The Great Waltz* an early forerunner of a Jukebox Musical as it was based on the music of Johann Strauss Senior and Junior. This was a glittering affair and the Friday Night Gala (which all the company were invited to attend by buying tickets and was invariably a very memorable event) was attended by Princess Anne who, after the performance, came backstage and met members of the company.

Other changes were coming into the club. For a long time, people tended to perform with one club in Bristol only occasionally guesting with another club. This was gradually changing as people began to go from club to club depending on the show being presented and the parts on offer. Part of the reason for this, where Bristol Light Opera Club were concerned, was that it only did one show a year and company members wanted to do more. An attempt to address this (and to keep a mixture of light opera and musicals) was made in 1986 when BLOC did two shows. In May, it produced the light opera *Orpheus in the Underworld* and in November the musical *Oklahoma!*. Although both shows were well received and attended, the idea was not tried again.



However, rather than doing two shows, the club did stage a number of concerts in around May time to try and give the club a more cohesive feel. These included *The Rhythm of Life* in 1990 with the interesting feature of combining Junior BLOC with the Seniors. In 1991, *Porgy and Bess* and *Cole Porter*; in 1992, *Olde Tyme Music Hall*; in 1993, *The Diamond Jubilee Gala Concert*, and *The Best of British* in 1994. All these apart from the *Olde Tyme Music Hall* were presented at The Colston Hall. The *Olde Tyme Music Hall* was presented in the club's natural home – The Bristol Hippodrome. Again, for some reason, these stopped but for a time they were much enjoyed by the club and audiences alike.

Other changes were subtler. In 1976, members of the club were expected to project to the back of the Upper Circle - everyone in the company seemed to have a deaf old aunt that directors told us we needed to make sure could hear us! At the front of the stage were some "floating" microphones, whose role was to support those on stage. However, as the style of shows changed and more touring shows used amplification, Bristol Light Opera Club followed suit to where everyone who had a spoken line, and the entire orchestra, was miked.



The Production team frequently changed and Directors during this period included Wyn Johnson, Sally Noble, Brian Harding, Ian Burton, and Vicki Klein. For eight years the Musical Director was David Clarke and then included David Ogden, Christopher Northam, Julian Edgell, and Sydney Sager. Choreographers varied from almost show to show. But the Stage Director remained the same in the person of Pete Sutton as did most of the Committee.

The next big change came in 1994. BLOC decided to do the musical *42nd Street* and appointed Vicki Klein to direct and choreograph. Vicki stated from the outset that she didn't feel the current club had the capabilities to do the show as it was essentially a dancing show. This meant that auditions were held specifically to do this show and a cast of over a hundred fantastic dancers were assembled to present this show. Obviously, this created disappointment for some of the members of the club who had spent most of their time under the stage doing pit singing and making only the occasional appearance on stage.

This led to a big debate within Bristol Light Opera Club as to its nature and function: is it a club or is it a production company? This debate continues but one outcome was the change in its name.

“From 1989 to 1998 we did not perform a single light opera. So as with all things, they change. The club’s roots back in the thirties was very much based on the performance of light opera, but times change and tastes change as do connotations of a name, thus the management committee were very conscious that not only were the choice of shows moving away from light opera into musicals, but that the name Bristol Light Opera Club was potentially having detrimental effect at the box office, as who in the 70’s, 80’s, and into the 90’s wanted to attend the theatre to see light opera? It was thus a natural progression to change the name to BLOC Productions, where we could retain the abbreviated original name but lose the connotation of light opera. There was also the thought process and debate that BLOC was no longer the old familiar year-long club. There was a wide choice of other meaningful musical groups in and around Bristol and the club members wanted to “float” between clubs to have the pick of what they wanted to do and, in many cases, try their luck with principal roles as the choices were many and varied. The “old” Bristol Light Opera Club was no more. Folks wanted a shorter rehearsal period as did the production officials - thus the addition of the word “Productions”. This was chosen to signify the fact that BLOC came together once a year for rehearsals to undertake a production at the Bristol Hippodrome, albeit it to say that the officers of the clubs had a full year diary with the planning and management of a production of the size required for the Bristol Hippodrome. The Management Committee thus over a few years finally decided to name change; that decision was ratified at an AGM, the Charity Commission had no objection to the proposed name change, thus it happened. BLOC Productions was born.” – Eric Arnold.

So Bristol Light Opera Club was no more. Now it was BLOC Productions but what did that mean? Who were the members of BLOC? What was the club nature of the company as social activities had gradually reduced and the Annual Gala Dinner had gone? Should all productions be like *42nd Street* and everyone have to audition to be in the show on a yearly basis? Should the standard be so high that only people of virtually a professional level who were a triple threat be able to perform in BLOC shows? The debate continues.

Meanwhile BLOC continued to perform at The Bristol Hippodrome. It continued to attract talented performers and creative teams. Also, generally it attracted good audiences as it entered its next chapter: **The John Cousins’ years.**



BLOCBUSTERS – a view from the stage

By Jenny Foster

"I have loved everything about being in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and I wish it didn't end! Everyone involved in the show was really nice and being on the Hippodrome stage was amazing!" – Toby



"Performing in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* was not only an amazing experience for performing on the Hippodrome stage but also for making lots of new friends and making life memories!" – Jake



"The auditions were brilliant, they weren't scary at all and being in the show at the Hippodrome was so exciting. It was like being part of one big family and I have made some great new friends and met up with some old ones. Thanks to being in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, I have now joined Ivy Arts and was in *Footloose* in March!" – Connor

When I was asked to sing a solo for the *BLOCBUSTERS* show, I balked; there are so many amazing singers in BLOC, and I'm more of a level two kinda singer – a reliable alto in the chorus, but not a soloist. And, being menopausal, I get shakes and flushes when I'm in the spotlight! But I asked myself When will I get another chance to sing "Send in the Clowns"? And Ian assured me that it was more of an 'acting' song, so I took a deep breath and went for it.

That was the beauty of *BLOCBUSTERS*: giving so many more members an opportunity to sing the most wonderful numbers that we might never get the chance to perform in a show. And wow, what hidden talents we uncovered! All being on an equal footing (with no leading roles) meant it was such a friendly and encouraging rehearsal period, even as we struggled together to learn all the words and dance moves to the chorus numbers! Hats off to the tambourine players and the tappers, no idea how they nailed that! I know there were times that we didn't think we'd be 'performance ready'. But John and Ian's unerring faith and determination got us to the finish line, and we were able to pull it off in all its sequined glory.

The run had its issues – Charlotte high kicking Brendan in the face, and the fire alarm evacuation being the most extreme examples(!), but the camaraderie and professionalism of that show made it a real joy to be part of, and reminded me of why I'm so proud to be in BLOC.



If you'd like to place an article in the BLOC Bailiwick, email us bailiwick@BLOCproductions.co.uk



BLOCBUSTERS – from the other side of the footlights

By Ian Taylor

When John Cousins asked me to be his assistant on *BLOCBUSTERS*, I had to think the offer over carefully. I'd recently gone through a pretty awful time in my personal life and didn't know if I was ready or not to get involved with such a big project. I certainly wanted to help John and BLOC Productions out - and yes, I can make a great cup of coffee and run around like a professional headless chicken. But I'd never been on a production team before and so had never had to be the person to tell my friends what they were or weren't doing in the most effective way. Did I have the knowledge and qualifications to do that? Might my criticism end up offending people? Am I thick skinned enough to cope with the fact that some of those friends might tell me to bugger off?

I knew that John wanted someone whom he could trust to take off some of the pressure and I didn't want to let him down - but was I making a mistake crossing to the dark side? In fact, I had nothing to worry about. The whole experience from beginning to end was an absolute joy. The first few meetings with John and our brilliant musical director, Brendan Casey, in which we came up with a themed-song list, agreed a running order and matched the right songs to the right singers showed that we clicked well as a team. Following that very positive start, the way in which the company rose to the many challenges that we put to them encouraged us to aim consistently higher and higher - and led ultimately to that magical first performance.

Being on the production side of the fence demonstrated a few things that I had always taken for granted as a performer. Firstly, there's the astonishing amount of preparation work done by the director. John came up with the concept, planned a complex rehearsal schedule, designed and costumed the show, staged each musical number and co-ordinated with our team of talented choreographers. As well as all that, he worked closely with the technical team on lighting and sound issues, while liaising closely with the BLOC committee and carrying out or overseeing a multitude of other tasks without which the production simply wouldn't have happened - or at least not to the standard that John rightly demanded. This man was supremely organised, hardworking and focussed and I take off my hat to him. He knew exactly what this show should look like and sound like and he delivered it.

Secondly, I came to realise how lucky we were to have such a dedicated, accomplished, talented and hardworking musical director as Brendan Casey. Quite simply, the show would not have been the success it was without him. He researched all the music, re-orchestrated the cuts to the score, worked patiently with each performer, understood their vocal capabilities and made sure that they shone on stage. What a huge asset he was. The third thing I learned was how much I loved working with the actors. For the first time I fully understood why it's a hugely rewarding thing to be part of creating and shaping a production. I was fortunate to be allocated many one-to-one rehearsals with soloists and small groups, collaborating with them on developing their performances - whether their singing, acting or simply the way they moved on stage. The warmth and feedback I had from every one of them made me realise how much I enjoyed the role of performance coach and how much I'd love to do it again. I cannot exaggerate the joy of watching performers act on the advice that I'd offered them - a tilt of a head, a lift of an arm, a walk downstage, a quick turn, a facial reaction, or simply standing still. Seeing my ideas given life by our talented company members was both thrilling and profoundly rewarding. So, thank you BLOC Productions for entrusting me with a small but important role in creating *BLOCBUSTERS*. Thank you to our amazing cast members who stepped up and were nothing short of magnificent. Thank you to our stupendous technical crew who made the show look and sound so professional.

Finally, I must offer my greatest thanks to John and Brendan. It's said that two's company and three's a crowd but, thankfully - and I hope that they would both agree with me - that certainly wasn't the case this time around.



"I really enjoyed learning the scenes and my favourite was the circus scene when I could use my stilts and watch "Me Ol' Bamboo". I liked it because I made new friends and even the adults were so friendly and supportive of the children. It was really funny in the dressing rooms because we told lots of jokes in between our scenes. I was very happy when I got in because I worked really hard to do my best in the auditions and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* is one of my favourite shows and so I was very excited to be in it. When I was on the stage, I felt joyful with everyone around on stage and under the lights knowing so many people were watching. I love acting so much. I liked the sewer costume the best and I thought the Director, Choreographer, and the Children's Chaperone, who is called Gerri, were very good at their jobs and made an epic show for the audience to enjoy. It was the most fun week ever" - Pepper

BLOC to West End—Memoires of an MD

By Mark Collins



I had the pleasure of joining BLOC in 2002, a year after I'd got my Masters from Bristol University. My girlfriend (now wife!), Jo Jackson, had been part of the Bristol amateur dramatic youth scene before we'd met (doing a musical!) at Cardiff University. I was working as a singing teacher for South Gloucestershire Music Service when a student, Jaleelah Galbraith, mentioned BLOC were auditioning for *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I'd always wanted to do the show, and we were thrilled when both Jo and I managed to get into the company. I was an aspiring composer/arranger, but I'd done lots of MT on stage both in youth theatre where I grew up in Weymouth, and whilst at Uni in Cardiff. It was such a great company and rehearsal process. I was instantly made to feel welcome and, in John Cousins, we had a great Director. This being pre-children, there were many post-rehearsal drinks at the local pub in Cotham and a brilliant production week - my first at the Bristol Hippodrome.

As many people know, cut forward many years and I've since gone on to London and now conduct musicals in the West End, but this all started back with BLOC in 2002 on *JCS*. Our brilliant MD, Chris Northam, was sick one evening, and I mentioned I could play the piano, so I filled in. Until that moment, for some reason I'd never considered myself as a Musical Director, as after reading Music at Cardiff

“As you can imagine, it was a surreal time!”

University I'd trained as a film composer at Bristol University. A few weeks later, my good friend Simon Gregory said he was setting up a new company (Theatreworx with Gerri, and Steve and Sarah Blackmore) and would I be interested in being MD for their inaugural production. I gratefully accepted, and we had the best time doing *The Christmas Schooner* at Queens Elizabeth Hospital. Brilliant cast and team, it was lovely to premiere an unknown new musical. At the same time, the phone kept ringing and I was asked to MD shows for Failand Drama Circle, BAOS Junior, BAOS, and I got involved with Kelly Packer's brilliant Ivy Arts. Alex Turasiewicz was amazingly supportive and asked me to conduct some fabulous productions at Filton High (now Abbey Wood Community School). I also kept going as an actor, appearing in Backstage's *Man Of La Mancha* and BLOC's *The Music Man*. But after that, Chris was taking a break, and John kindly asked if I would MD *The Sound Of Music*. We had such a great time that I continued the following year with the amateur premiere of *The Witches Of Eastwick*. Every amateur company has done this show now, but we were very much the 'guinea pig' production with interest (and some pressure!) from CamMack and the original creative team. It was about then, in 2005, I started to get asked to MD professional productions and after some small scale regional and touring shows, in late 2006 I ended up in Frankfurt MD'ing *City Of Angels* with Nikolai Foster (now artistic director of Curve in Leicester).

It was about that time that a friend I'd met on a tour asked me to play for a TV show she was the vocal coach and judge for, and suddenly I was working with Andrew Lloyd Webber on the BBC show *How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?* and conducting a filmed concert at his estate in Sydmonton. As you can imagine, it was a surreal time!

In 2007, my now wife Jo, who works in publishing children's picture books, got offered a great job in London and we decided to go for it. My last show in Bristol was *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* at the Olympus in April 2007, with the wonderful Lu Jeffery next to me on violin. Leaving Bristol and our family and friends was really hard, but I think they knew we really had to give it a shot. Much as we miss everyone, we haven't regretted it professionally. I went straight onto the Menier Chocolate Factory's new production of *La Cage Aux Folles*, followed by a new musical *Once Upon A Time At The Adelphi* in Liverpool with Bristol amdram alumnus Phil Willmott. We've since written three musicals together, two of which (*Lost Boy* and *Princess Caraboo* originally a commission by Tom Morris for Bristol Old Vic) have now been published by Samuel French.



The choreographer on *Adelphi* was the brilliant Andrew Wright, someone you have all come to know and love. Andrew was brilliant to me and recommended me to First Family Entertainment Music Supervisor Chris Hatt, who asked me to conduct the Bristol Hippodrome pantos in 2008 and 2009.

I spent a bit of time teaching at Arts Educational and Guildford School of Acting in between shows out of town (I even managed a short run in New York of *Three Sides*, an early musical by *One Man Two Guvvners* composer Grant Olding) and 'depping' on the West End production of *Jersey Boys*, and was just preparing a third panto season for Bristol in late 2010 when Chris Hatt called me - would I consider not doing panto and instead joining the West End production of *Billy Elliot the Musical*?

As you can imagine, it wasn't a hard decision. I loved the show so much, I was at the Victoria Palace for five and a half years until we closed in 2016 for the theatre's major refurbishment and the subsequent re-opening with *Hamilton*.

Some would ask, how can you be on a show for that long? Don't you get bored? And this is the main difference between amateur and professional theatre, apart from obviously money (although many pro shows are attempted on amateur budgets!). The quality of acting and singing isn't an issue - indeed many of my Bristol amdram friends are better than many pro actors I've worked with. In amateur theatre, the runs are so short that you blink and miss them, every show is gold, but the downside is you don't get time to really perfect anything from either an acting or technical point of view - as a company, you'll be just hitting your stride by Saturday and then it's all over.

Being a professional in this industry makes the job like most others - the same thing for three, six, twelve months, maybe more on a long running show. It's about learning to deal with this issue. With *Billy*, it was great, because the constant rotating door of amazing, talented kids made it so interesting and worthwhile. It's also the greatest British of all time (sorry *Oliver!*, but it's true). The other upside of being an MD rather than an actor was that I could have multiple projects alongside *Billy* that meant I never got bored of doing the same show. During my time there, I supervised a UK tour of *Britain's Got Bhangra*, a West End production of *Dessa Rose* starring Cynthia Erivo and Cassidy Janson, and MD'd the world premiere of *The Secret Diary Of Adrian Mole: The Musical* at Curve.

After *Billy Elliot* closed, I stayed in Victoria on a rather stressful and critically mauled new rock musical called *Exposure* at the St James Theatre (now The Other Palace). Being positive, the music was great, and I learned a lot about dealing with multiple interesting issues...!

Just prior to *Exposure* rehearsals starting, I was offered Associate MD on the new London production of *Dreamgirls*, which started rehearsals in September 2016. I had a few weeks off in between jobs, and I've been on this tremendous production ever since. It's been great having so many Bristol friends come over to see it! We close in January, having been given an amazingly long (seven months!) notice period. I can't say for sure what will be next, but I have a few projects in the pipeline with the lovely team from *Adrian Mole*, so hopefully 2019 will be fun!

This now sounds like a long boring speech but I want to thank a few people for making all this happen - Jaleelah, she doesn't realise it, but none of this probably would have happened if she hadn't mentioned BLOC were doing *JCS*... Simon Gregory, Steve Blackmore, Matty Jeanes, John Cousins, Alex T, Vicky Klein, Kelly Packer and Chris Northam for trusting me to work with them. My go-to rhythm section of Ian Tucker, Robin Davies, James Kendrick, and the late great James Candy. And, of course, Andrew Wright; I finally got a chance to tell him this at the WhatsOnStage awards last year, but without him, I wouldn't have made the step up from regional to West End theatre when I did. Looking forward to keeping in touch with everyone - see you soon!



BLOC CRYPTIC EMOJI CHALLENGE

By Philip Hallworth

Name these past BLOC shows – including shows from the light operatic era:

e.g.  (3, 4, 3, 1) = The King and I

1.  (3, 7, 2, 8)

2.  (11)

3.  (6)

4.  (3, 4, 5, 5)

5.  (6, 3, 3, 8)

6.  (4, 2, 6)

7.  (6, 9)

8.  (2, 4, 4)

9.  (5)

10.  (1, 5, 2, 6)

11.  (3, 10)

12.  (4, 9)

13.  (6, 6, 4, 4)

14.  (5, 5)

15.  (6, 3)

16.  (5, 3, 5)

17.  (8)

18.  (3, 5, 3)

19.  (10)

20.  (8, 4)

Name these characters from BLOC's most recent five Hippodrome shows - two from each show, in no particular order!

21.  (5, 11)
22.  (7, 9)
23.  (8)
24.  (5, 5)
25.  (7, 3, 7)
26.  (5)
27.  (5, 7)
28.  (9)
29.  (8, 6)
30.  (5, 9)

Name these songs from BLOC's most recent five Hippodrome shows - two from each show, in no particular order!

31.  (3, 4, 3, 4, 1, 4)
32.  (8, 8)
33.  (3, 5, 6)
34.  (1, 5, 4, 6, 3, 5)
35.  (4, 1, 4, 2, 4)
36.  (5, 6, 1, 6)
37.  (4, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5)
38.  (6, 5)
39.  (3, 5, 2, 7)
40.  (3, 4, 2, 5)

Thinking of a show which many believe to be good but I think otherwise has proved challenging. However, *Made in Dagenham* is one show I struggle to understand as to why it has proven so popular. The premise of the story is very promising: detailing the real events of the Ford sewing machinists' strike of 1968, and its use of many strong female characters is something which has been grossly lacking in the field of musical theatre. My issues with this show, however, stem from both its presentation of the opposition to the factory workers, which this show deems to be all men, and much of the music itself.

To really empathise and root for the women to be successful in their action, the male characters must be presented as more than just misogynistic bumbling idiots which unfortunately this show does. A prime example of this is presented in the bar scene where a male "comedian" rattles off a number of sexist jokes in quick succession to the disgust of the surrounding female cast. This "comedian" is then swiftly put in his place by one of the female cast-members, who rebukes the "comedian" with a joke aimed at men, with the desired effect of achieving a cheap laugh from the audience. The effect of this scene is subsequently lost as a result of this and the scene proved highly predictable as you knew the joke was coming. This poorly written portrayal of the male opposition is also presented in a number of scenes which feature some of the male factory workers. These scenes again can be summed up with a number of jokes made at women's expense and really shouldn't feature in the show as they offer little in terms of story or character development. The only well written male is the part of Eddie O'Grady who does demonstrate both levity in his interactions with his family and the torment displayed in "The Letter".

On the subject of the music, it's here again that I think this show falls well short in portraying the importance of the story. Songs such as "Always a Problem" and "This is America" try to bring some comedy to the story which is executed poorly. "This is America" plays far too hard on the American stereotype to the point where it becomes repetitive and boring. "Always a Problem" also fails in its attempt to make comedy, which is unsurprising as its lyrics revolve around the balance of payments. Even the final number "Stand Up" is used as a way of manipulating the audiences into giving a standing ovation. Of course, you want to support what the women and men are chanting for but by demanding everybody to 'stand up' it seems like a desperate attempt for approval.

I think it is a shame that the incredibly important story of the Equal Pay Act, and those who fought for it, has been reduced to cheap laughs and poorly developed music. I am positive this led to the show only lasting six months on its professional debut due to poor ticket sales as audiences, on the whole, refused to pay the prices for what was essentially a sub-par piece of musical comedy.



Made in Dagenham

THE MUSICAL

An amateur production by arrangement with
Concord Theatricals Ltd. on behalf of Tams-Witmark LLC

Music and Lyrics by Cole Porter
Book by Sam and Bella Spewack

BLOC Productions presents

KISS



KATE

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