

BLOC



BLOC Productions

Bailiwick

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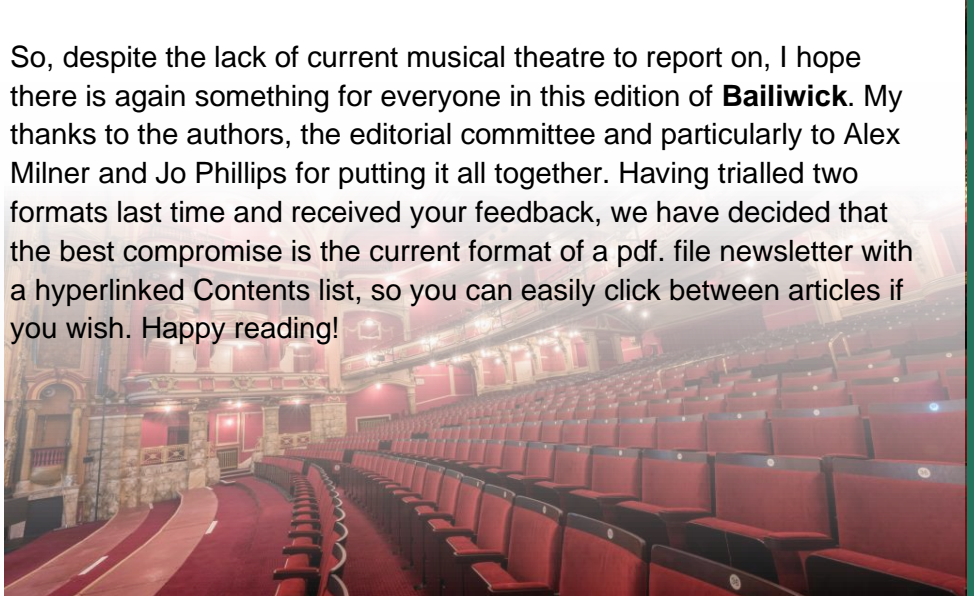
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Editorial by Phil Hallworth

I had hoped to be introducing a newsletter packed with exciting news about Bristol amateur theatre getting back on its feet, rehearsal rooms buzzing with excitement and audiences flocking to see our shows, but we must all be patient a while longer. On the positive side, it gives us all more time to plan for the future and reflect on the past. So in this edition Andrew Carpenter speaks of BLOC's forward thinking and Alex Turasiewicz & Chris Parslow provide the next instalment of a fascinating and informative series on BLOC's history with illustrations provided from Stewart McPherson's archive, which segues nicely into a mention of Stewart's second article introducing us to the skills of his craft as a theatre photographer.

Jenny Bryant is this edition's Desert Island Shows castaway; and continuing the series about the theatrical careers that former BLOC members have gone on to enjoy, we hear this time from OJ Lynch. Alex Turasiewicz writes about the dilemmas and practicalities involved in choosing a show from the committee's perspective, and he interviews Ryan Macaulay at MTI to give us an understanding of the process from their side too. Last but not least it's the return of Jack Blackmore! Jack has agreed to write a regular Blog for us as he starts his MA Acting course at Guildford School of Acting.

So, despite the lack of current musical theatre to report on, I hope there is again something for everyone in this edition of **Bailiwick**. My thanks to the authors, the editorial committee and particularly to Alex Milner and Jo Phillips for putting it all together. Having trialled two formats last time and received your feedback, we have decided that the best compromise is the current format of a pdf. file newsletter with a hyperlinked Contents list, so you can easily click between articles if you wish. Happy reading!



Chairman's Overture by Andrew Carpenter



It was with deep regret that at our recent AGM I had to break the news to members that we would not be able to perform *Kiss Me, Kate* this September at The Bristol

Hippodrome. The risks surrounding COVID-19 made it impossible for the committee to make any other decision than to postpone it again. I would like to place on record our thanks to John Cousins and the whole of the creative/production team for the huge amount of time and effort they have already spent on this aborted production. I am pleased to say however that the committee have decided to use the same team in 2022. This means the club has been 'fallow' at The Hippodrome for three years, which is a bitter disappointment to us all, but looking on the bright side just think how euphoric we all will be when we get to set foot on the Hippodrome stage once again!



I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have worked so hard during the last twelve months to ensure BLOC continues to be a vibrant member organisation. The committee, who at first during lockdown were meeting weekly, those involved in producing and presenting our online

quizzes, the new team behind **Bailiwick** and those who provided us with a fabulous Carol Service and that wonderful presentation of 'Light' which we all enjoyed again at the AGM.

The recent member workshops, held throughout January, were a wonderful way of securing people's thoughts on subjects ranging from choice of shows and directors to rehearsal discipline and auditions. I was able to communicate the results of the workshops at the AGM and they be the subject of consideration for the committee in the coming months as we work hard to use the time during the coronavirus to improve the club's back of house processes and procedures. For those sufficiently interested, the full AGM presentation is available on the BLOC Productions web site.

More generally, with vaccinations well underway and the government's roadmap to normality now in place, I detect a huge improvement in morale throughout the creative and performing arts sector, both professional and amateur, so let us hope that the milestones are met and on 21st June we are all set free. I know there are already several possible performance opportunities being considered for later in the year and we hope to be able to announce something for late 2021 and/or early 2022 very soon.

For now, may I wish all BLOC members a very pleasant springtime and in the words of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers:

***"Well now, the barnyard is busy,
in a regular tizzy
And the obvious reason
is because of the season.
Ma Nature's lyrical
with her yearly miracle
Spring, Spring, Spring."***

The History BLOC 1996-2014

***by Alex Turasiewicz
& Chris Parslow***

Part One 1996-2007

(All photograph credits: Stewart McPherson)

Readers of the previous chapters of this History will know that 'Light Opera' is embedded in the name BLOC, but now the Club (renamed as BLOC Productions) was moving definitely into the world of Musical Theatre, from some established classics to shows that had recently finished in the West End.



The Hippodrome was receiving more and more top tours and BLOC's show had to fit into their annual programme and at the same time match the standard of the professional shows coming into the Theatre. Whereas in Light Opera the cast roles were often defined as singers and dancers, now there was a need for individual performers to be a triple threat. At the same time, the technical demands of shows were increasing - sets were being moved electronically as one scene crossed over to the other, lighting was becoming more sophisticated and nearly everyone in the cast was being given a radio microphone. The cost implications of this were enormous. Sets were particularly problematic as they needed to fill the large Hippodrome stage and not all had sets for hire or if they were available, they were very old fashioned in design and therefore not really suitable



for a modern production. So, audiences arrived with high expectations not only of the performers but of the entire production in every department and BLOC had to meet these challenges.

Over this period BLOC had one Director (John Cousins), one Technical Director (Peter Sutton), seven Musical Directors, five Choreographers, three Stage Managers and six different providers of scenery - one of which was BLOC itself. Together, the creative team supported by a group of over two-hundred other people, were able to produce productions that in NODA and Rose Bowl reviews were described as "more than a professional show;



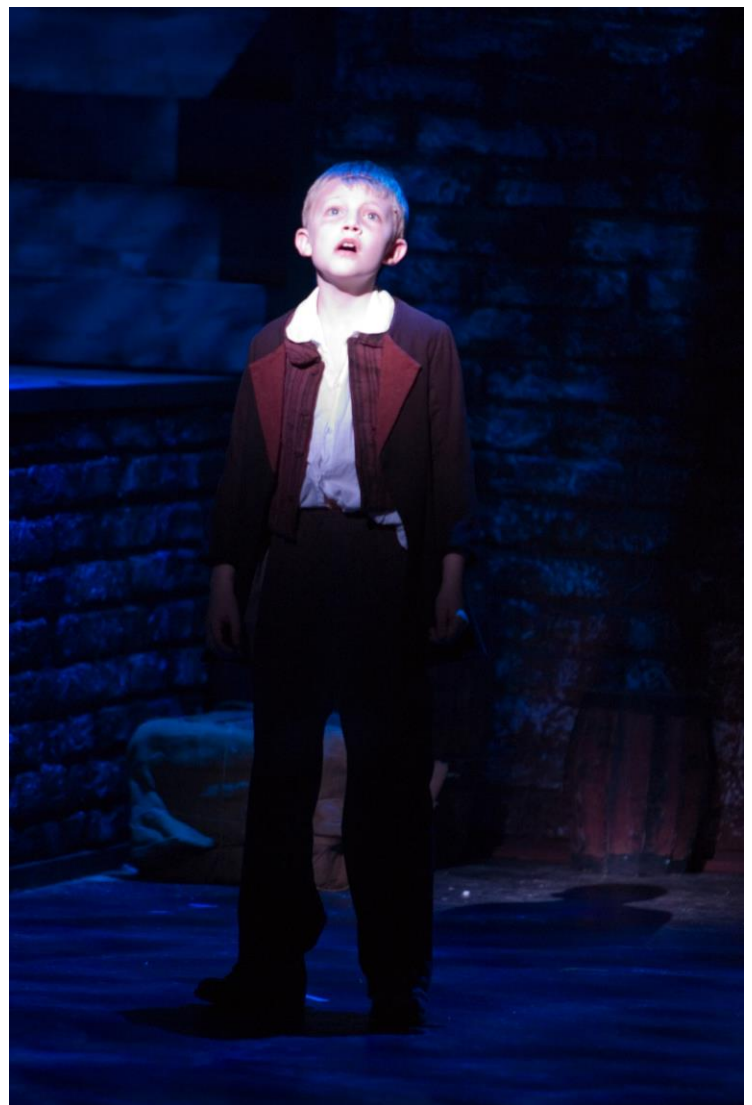
they outshone any professional production and many professional companies could learn from them."

The first few of these "John Cousins Years" saw the usual mixture of old and new shows. They included *Anything Goes*, *Barnum*, *The King and I* - for which Alison Sutton won a Rose Bowl as Best Supporting Actress in a musical - and *Fiddler on the Roof*, BLOC's third production of this piece. As always, the Club was trying to keep the balance between keeping the members involved and choosing a show that had strong Box Office appeal. Then in 2001 an offer came from The Really Useful Group. RUG intended to licence one of their shows to twelve companies that played in large theatres around the country. They would like us to be one of those companies and the show was – *Evita*!

BLOC was to be the first amateur company in the South West to perform *Evita* and the prospect was very exciting. In several members' Desert Island Shows for **Bailiwick** they mention the excitement of being involved in this show and it being one of their favourite stand out productions. It was a very well-known iconic show that many people had seen and loved. Elaine Paige's rendition of 'Don't Cry For Me Argentina' was seen as being almost definitive so there was a lot for the Club to live up to. The Rose Bowl critique started with "Evita is my favourite light opera. I have seen six professional productions and therefore I was a little apprehensive when coming to see BLOC's Production." However, it then went on to say, "My apprehension was unfounded. This was a highly co-ordinated and professional production... a superb piece of theatre which gave another very accomplished dimension to amateur theatre. Thank you for a brilliant evening." BLOC received three Rose Bowl nominations that year – Vicky Hartland for *Evita*, Sid Vardakis for *Che* and for Best Musical - it won Best Musical.

How to follow *Evita*? The choice was to be another Andrew Lloyd Webber show - *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Both *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* showed that when BLOC was able to do a show that amateurs had less opportunity to present

elsewhere, it would attract a lot of extra members to take part, and both these shows brought particularly a lot of extra men into the Company.



As an aside, people love to hear about theatrical mishaps and I am sure there are many in most BLOC productions – usually one hopes the audience have no knowledge of them as everything continues to go smoothly on stage. However, sometimes they happen in full view of the audience and one such was during *Jesus Christ Superstar* when Jesus has been placed on the cross and it was meant to be lifted up. It refused to go into position.

Chris Chapman – stage manager for the show writes:

“It was the climactic part of JCS, on the Thursday evening when Jesus has been unceremoniously tied to the cross, and the cast begin to push it up to the vertical... But I should go back to the previous day when our opposite numbers came down from Glasgow to see the newly released show, and specifically to see how the cross mechanism worked, as they wanted to borrow it for the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, a few weeks later. We demonstrated how easy it was to slide the cross into the socket, secure it just finger tight on the upper pair of nuts on the clamping mechanism, lift it to the vertical, and secure it in position by simply dropping in a small section of deck. The mechanism, which I had built from very heavy timbers at the old Rooftops Studio, consisted of a massive adjustable clamp which swivelled on a steel axle, all set in a 2m x 1.5m frame bolted to the stage, and hidden under the rostra that made up the upstage area. I knew every component intimately; construction was uncomplicated, its operation was dead easy, and it had worked perfectly through rehearsal, tech, dress, and performances thus far. But on that Thursday night, disaster struck... and the cross could not be raised.

What we had not appreciated with a very short get-in and testing period, was that if the lower pair of nuts on the clamping mechanism were set a half turn too tight, this would be enough to prevent the cross from fitting right to the bottom of the socket. In that position, the cross, on its way up, would hit the underside of the elevated walkway

that traversed the stage. In the split second between the crunch as it hit the walkway, and my handing over the cans to Julia - who was Call Boy - in the corner and starting to sprint upstage, I had worked out exactly what must have happened during the previous night's demonstration. I was desperately trying to stay calm, but it was one of those occasions when the blood drains from everywhere it might be useful, and a controlled panic sets in. The cast by now were desperately trying to push the wedge-end of the cross into the ground socket, and of course it was getting tighter and tighter with every shove. Me shouting “No, pull it out!” under cover of the orchestra was as counter-



intuitive to them, as shoving it in was to me. It was no help at all – if you have ever tried to herd a posse of cats you will understand how impotent I felt at that moment.

While the solution to the problem to me was somehow beautifully simple – pull it out a bit,



slacken off two nuts a bit and push it back in, implementing it was somehow impossibly out of reach. Momentarily I was tempted to march onto the stage, part the cast like the waters of the Red Sea, and work a little personal miracle, but I could not be seen (especially in my blacks) to upstage the man at the centre of the action, so decided the only solution was for him to be crucified at a 45 degree angle and handle the criticism of an outraged company, audience and theatre management when it descended on me. And it did. However, I am glad to say that having got over their initial horror and disbelief, everyone seemed to forgive the “mishap”, and I was even trusted to haul “The Haywain” around the stage in a subsequent production of *Oklahoma!* Just think - I could easily have dropped that in the pit!”

Following on from *Jesus Christ Superstar* BLOC undertook a more conventional show. This was *The*

Music Man, a particular favourite of the Director, John Cousins. In America the show was the staple of High schools and amateur societies, but it wasn’t so well known here. As the Rose Bowl adjudicator said, “*The Music Man* is a show with immense challenges ... it was a brilliant show and it’s a pity that it wasn’t as much of a Box Office success as previous shows.” So, it was a reminder that even if all the production elements were in place and it’s a great show it doesn’t, sadly, guarantee that it will be Box Office success.

As always when a show hasn’t had quite the Box Office success that was hoped for the Club turned to a show that should be a sure-fire Box Office success and this was *The Sound of Music*. Yet again the challenge is to create a production that would be enjoyed by an audience that probably knew every line, every song and came with very high expectations. Once again, they were not to be



disappointed and it was a sell-out show with even the back row of the gods being sold out. To those who have experienced it there is something very thrilling playing to a packed-out audience and being part of a show where “everyone in the audience went home singing something from the show - of course the best evidence of success.” (NODA report).

Modern shows often have inherent technical challenges, and this was very true about BLOC’s next show *The Witches of Eastwick*. The other interesting fact about this show was that BLOC were doing it only four years after it opened. Often there is quite a time gap between a show closing and it being made available to amateurs. This show demanded magic tricks and at the end of Act 1 the three witches have to fly. BLOC had done one before, but three? This implied cost would be daunting for most clubs as well as actually having the technical facilities to do it. So, with *Witches* BLOC was bringing a show to The Hippodrome that hadn’t been in the theatre before and for many it would be their first experience of the show. As the Rose Bowl critic said, “Congratulations to BLOC on



bringing to the Amateur stage a new and challenging piece of work that makes great technical demands with the specialist input of flying and Magic Staging.” The show deservedly won the NODA Award for Technical Achievement.

The other development that was happening was the emergence of new specialist Set Companies who were producing sets as new shows were being announced as long as they felt they would recoup their outlay; and the challenge for BLOC was both to get it booked before another Company and also to ensure it would sit well on The Hippodrome stage, one of the largest outside of London. Some worked better than others and often John Cousins, a highly skilled theatre designer, would add his own inimitable touches and he is especially the master of the zhushed curtains!

When you want to sell seats, one way to do so is to incorporate children into the production and with *Oliver!*, as there needed to be double casting, large ticket sales are almost guaranteed. Occasionally, as much as members of the cast of BLOC may have been involved in several productions of the same show already, a crowd pleaser is necessary to ensure the financial security of the Club.



From the sombre world of Dickens, BLOC went into the colourful world of *The Wizard of Oz* – at least it is after the opening. There have been several versions for the stage and for this production BLOC used the RSC version which tried to remain quite faithful to the film. Of course, being based on an RSC production there were many technical challenges but “the sound; lighting; flying; smoke - all were executed with great professionalism and added a real wow factor to many moments during the evening.” (Rose Bowl critic). Why this comment is particularly impressive is that compared with

professional shows, BLOC’s time for a technical rehearsal, especially when it’s a complex show, is extremely limited and the fact that BLOC is ready for opening night is sometimes little short of miraculous – to date we have never cancelled an opening night which can’t be said of all West End shows! As the Rose Bowl continues to say, “Credit must go to the stage management who exhibited great efficiency in the smooth running of the technical side of this production.” NODA also commented on the special effects: “Wonderful effects throughout, but the highlight must be Miss Gulch on her cycle peddling like mad against the full moon – the image will stay with me for a long time. As will the hologram effect of the Wizard himself – this added another dimension to the show. Congratulations to BLOC on another spectacular production.”

So, spectacle became another feature of a BLOC production and the audience never felt cheated of professional production values - all achieved at ticket prices much lower than the other shows at The Hippodrome.



Part Two of this recollection of “The Cousins Years” will be published in the July issue of Bailiwick, along with an interview with the man himself!

Desert Island Shows by Jenny Bryant

Musical theatre was a big part of my life growing up and we went the theatre each year. One of my earliest memories is going to watch *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* performed by another group at the Bristol Old Vic. I loved the show and little did I know that as I got older and joined the world of amateur dramatics, that some of those performers would become my friends in BLOC today.

BLOC shows were a big part of my growing up; we would always try to watch the shows each year and secretly I always wanted to join them on stage. So, I auditioned in 2011, was thrilled to be successful and I have never looked back. I then spent over eight years on the committee, so I feel like I have become very much part of the BLOC family.

Here are my eight Desert Island Shows ...

The King and I:

This was my first show with BLOC and I enjoyed every minute of it. From making new friends, being cast as 'Lover George' in the ballet scene, and of course standing on the Hippodrome stage for the first time. This was a great experience for me and one I will always remember and be proud of. The music and costumes in this show were beautiful and getting to meet the little children was a joy. I was paired with little Millie, who is very grown up today, but it was a lovely touch to this show. One thing I will always remember was kneeling down at the end for the King's death, which seemed to last a lifetime! It does not sound that bad, but the standing up wobbles afterwards were very real and if you were lucky to catch this one, you may have spotted a few cushions being added in to save our knees. This show is one that was definitely worth the discomfort and has a special place in my heart.

Thanks for the Memories:

This was a celebration of the Bristol Hippodrome's 100th Birthday. Sadly, BLOC was not able to perform in its weekly slot this year, due to the big



shows booked for their 100th year but The Hippodrome asked us to take part in their two-day celebration show and, as always, we jumped at the chance to perform on the stage in various numbers. Although there was not a lot to do in this, I enjoyed the opportunity to celebrate The Hippodrome.

Westenders:

This show was a joy to be a part of and the first solo I had with BLOC so it's very special for me. Due to not being at the Hippodrome the previous year, BLOC decided to do a concert at The Colston Hall to celebrate BLOC's 80th birthday. We put on a show of BLOC through the years and it was great to learn about the club's history and be a part of so many different musical numbers. I was lucky enough to be given the *Sound of Music* solo and as I had grown up watching and listening to this musical, I was very excited. I also got to perform a

small part as the little girl in 'Eastwick Knows', little did I know John was thinking St. Trinian's from behind - ha ha. A great show, so much fun and to end with the title of the next production was just a lovely touch.



White Christmas:

This show was a dream to be a part of and one of my favourites to be in. It was just magical - it snowed, it has beautiful songs, costumes and great dance routines. This show had the feel-good factor, everyone was Christmassy and the seven minutes tap routine kept us all in shape. I was very lucky have the small part of 'dance teacher' and was also a featured dancer in this production. I often see people cry after a show and have never understood it or had this feeling until this show. It bought tears to my eyes when the week was over, I loved every



minute of it and would jump at the chance to do this magical, festive show again.

Sister Act:

This was another great show I was thankful to be in; the nun's outfits were very comfortable throughout the show although I do love glitz and glamour so was very pleased to see a blue sequin number with my name on it! The finale nun outfit was a sea of white material and sequins when we were all together, albeit a little heavy, but adrenaline carried us through! Everyone really bonded in this show, we had some crazy harmonies to learn, everyone helped each other with routines, and it was overall a fab BLOC family experience.



Fiddler on the Roof:

Fiddler on the Roof was a very different show to be part of, but it carries a really important message that is relatable today in some places. It was a very large cast for this show as we had children involved again and it was lovely to see some faces return from *The King and I* children, but they had grown up! This production is quite long and ends on a sad note, so it was strange to leave the theatre with a different kind of feeling - still buzzing from performing but left in a more reflective mood. It was also an added bonus with this show when the BBC asked BLOC to record the musical number 'Tradition' for a documentary.

**Chitty Chitty Bang Bang:**

I am sure like most of you, I grew up watching the film and it's always been iconic. I jumped at the chance to perform in this show. It's fun, lovely songs and of course, the flying car! They say you should never work with children and animals, but we did both - we had the children back and a beautiful dog. I loved getting the opportunity to tap with my fellow comical nurses and it almost became a challenge to see how many of us could have mono brows etc .by the end of the week! A magical show for BLOC and I am so glad we decided to take on the challenge. The look on everyone's faces in the audience was just magical, especially when the car flew.

**BLOCBUSTERS:**

This was a fantastic show put together by BLOC to show what our company can do; it was great fun to be part of and the production as a whole was great. There was quite a lot of illness on show week, me included, but we all came together and supported each other. I was lucky enough to sing some songs from *Wicked*, *Kiss Me*, *Kate* and *Tangled* - I loved every minute of singing them. We had some great musical numbers and in the short time we put this together, it was a success. I really enjoyed performing with my friends in this show.

I had done many productions over the years but to return to the stage joining BLOC was a happy occasion and it started my am-dram experience off again. Since joining all those years ago, I have been lucky enough to join other companies and perform in many musicals like: *The Life*, *Made in Dagenham*, *Legally Blonde*, and *42nd Street* to name a few.

I was obviously hoping my next show would be *Kiss Me*, *Kate* with BLOC in September but sadly that is not to be. I look forward to the day when I can hug all my BLOC friends and perform with them again very soon.

If you could only take one show soundtrack with you?

At the moment, I think I would have to take the musical soundtrack to *Six*, it's great to sing along to and will have me dancing around the island in no time.

What theatrical item would you take with you?

This is a tricky one. I want to say my tap shoes as they would keep me occupied, but it is not practical on an island, so I think I would have to go for the Chitty car, that way I could fly off of the island and come back whenever I want! (*Sorry Jenny, escape vehicles are not allowed, so the tap shoes it is and we'll find you a flat rock! Ed.*)

BLOC Exposed (Part Two) by Stewart McPherson

Theatre photographer Stewart McPherson shares the second instalment of a series of articles explaining and illustrating his craft.

“Technical challenges - I love them...”

I have always been more driven by capturing an image than the technical aspects of the gear I use and over thinking things, especially in live performance when you don't really have the luxury of time. Don't get me wrong, I know the workings of my cameras inside out but how the 'actual' electronics and mechanics create and store what I see through the lens now that's a different story. When I used to shoot on film I understood that perfectly and, although that technology had its' limitations, it was in plain terms 'simple'. The digital revolution has brought massive benefits and so much more creative latitude but also some mind-boggling tech. It's often said, correctly in my humble opinion, that most cameras are capable of much more than most photographers ask of them.

But I digress from my main theme for this edition - I may have hinted in my last article that I love the challenge of shooting live theatre and although I'm hyper critical of my work, sometimes, just occasionally, there is an image which I am forced to

stop and think about. About the challenge I overcame to capture it and even feel a little pride in the final result. This article is a tribute to just a few of those photos with the best simplified explanation I can muster as to why they stretched my capabilities (and, frankly, just a good excuse to show some more nice photos!!!)

It's fair to say that there are a few things which can be 'troublesome' when it comes to shooting for the theatre - in no particular order: a red wash all over the stage, high contrast between the follow spot and the rest of the scene, low light and fast dance routines, 'a red wash over the stage' (did I mention I hate that - I hate it as it destroys skin tones and definition and makes my exposures impossible).

I apologise if this all sounds very factual and boring but during a show my mind is racing watching the lighting changes and working out the camera settings as well as the best angle and position to get a shot, which is why those of you who have been out front at the Hippodrome during a dress run will have seen me running about like a complete fool.

Here's a quick comparison - three images from "The King & I" - one from 1998 and two from 2011. The difference in quality is obvious but I'd venture to say that 2011 was technically much more difficult with the star cloth, lower light levels and, as in the one below, more movement.



A lot of these images are quite dark to show the challenge - I'm not thinking about what my camera will do (left to its' own metering it will almost always over or underexpose the shot), I'm thinking more about how I can cheat the camera into giving me what I want it to (the camera never lies right?)

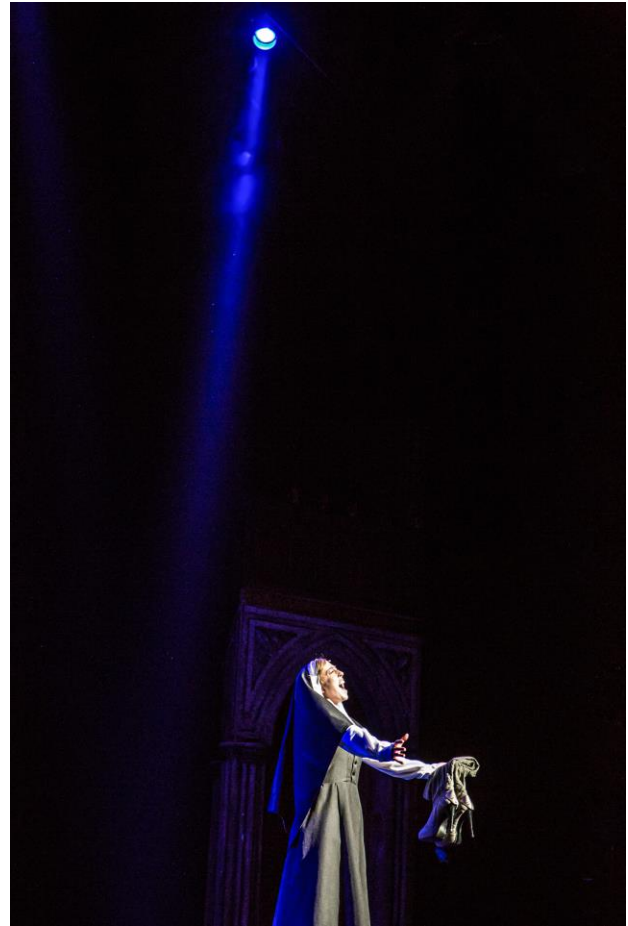
Here's an interesting one from "My Fair Lady" 2017 - my aim was to freeze the action without shooting too quickly and losing too much light. I'm pretty sure Adele Stich liked this image...!!!



I have some favourite images simply because I think they were ones I shot on instinct and got exactly what I imagined watching the action - there's no time to stop and view every image to see if it's ok - that's the way to miss the next six shots and they might be the best ones I shoot all day. I believe knowing my gear and shooting on instinct allows me the freedom to simply watch and wait. I don't always get it right but when I do it's a great feeling.



Here are a few images with brief explanations of why they were 'challenging':



"Sister Act" 2014

I love the bottom images below as they balanced really well between the shadowy backdrop and the cast, in particular the one of the nuns where some are lit and some are in shadow, by shooting for the light it gave me lovely gradients of shadow.



"Oklahoma" 2009

A fun balance between the light on the principals and the moon gobo on the back cloth - that's why I love ballads, they give me time.

**"Sunset Boulevard" 2015**

This was a very opulent looking show to shoot and many of the images were full of light in varying degrees but this one is an all time favourite of mine. Mike Griffiths briefed me on what would happen and I'm most grateful to him, it allowed me to get the best possible angle to have all three principals in shot with their different reactions, lit and in focus. I was very relieved when I looked at the camera after the curtain went down - I couldn't stop and check as the action was very pacey.

"Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" 2019

Firstly a great show to shoot with so much colour and light generally but the flying car called for a lot of shadow and a black backdrop, add to that bright headlights and uplighters to illuminate the principals in the car and you get a huge contrast -loved it and if I'm honest it took me a couple of attempts to crack it but this one came out pretty well.



"Fiddler On The Roof" 2016

Overall not too difficult as there was a good amount of lighting throughout and I loved the overall look but a couple of scenes were more challenging -Fruma Sara flying again called for shadow and backlight to cover the flying mechanism and the Fiddler in near darkness with a pin spot looked great .



Bright lights, follow spot, lots of shadow and a colour wash - gotta love a challenge - L to R:

"Sunset Boulevard"2015 "Beauty and The Beast" 2010 "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" 2019





and finally...

"The Wizard of Oz" 2007

Dame Faye Banks playing a witch - the lights stayed up during a pause and this was the only shot I got before it went dark.

And... "Oliver!" 2006

Simon Vardakis as Bill Sikes - great light for this one and what an image, just enough of a balance between shadow and edge light lucky...? maybe or just patience and skill.



Where Is He Now? by OJ Lynch



To many about to read this, the answer to the question might not be “where is he now?” but “now, who is he?”

Percentages, as one learns at school, are important though boring, so it may only interest those who are so inclined to know that I used to make up 80% of the black performers on the local stage with various groups including BLOC, BMCC, Brigstow and Blackstage... erm, Backstage!! I appeared in several BLOC shows including *Guys and Dolls*, *Hans Christian Andersen* and as the King in *The King and I*.

It's almost twenty years since I ran away from Bristol to join the circus!!!

Well, that's how it seemed to my parents when I told them I was leaving my job as a television director at BBC Bristol to become an ensemble member of the Hamburg production of *The Lion King*!! Of course, it was a risky move but if there is no risk, there is no reward, and one shouldn't be pushed around by the fears in one's mind but be led by the dreams in one's heart!!

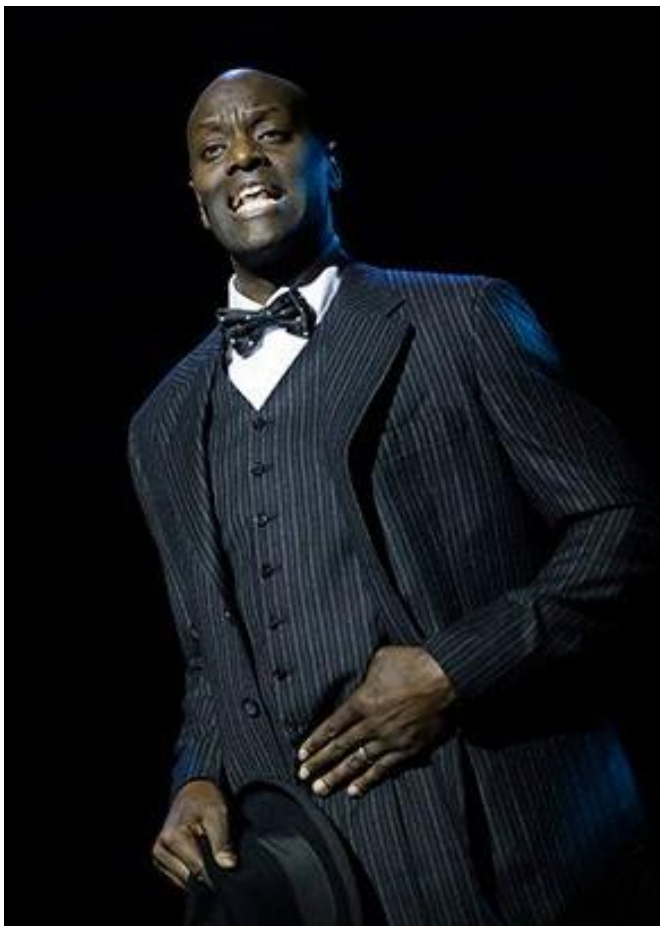
Once I arrived in Hamburg, I found myself at school again! In addition to learning the German required for the show, we also had a crash course in several African languages that form the basis of what the ensemble sing! One thing I will say at this stage is that local theatre is a great way to prepare you for these challenges. The rehearsal period of a few evenings each week gives one an intense focus that serves one well when one has eight hours a day to rehearse!!



After spending four years at Lion King as ensemble and Mufasa understudy, I made the decision to leave and return to England. I auditioned successfully for a production of *Five Guys Named Mo...* the only thing being was that it was for a production at the English Theatre, Frankfurt!! So, it was back to Germany for five more months.

After a successful run, playing Big Mo, I decided to return to Hamburg to pursue other opportunities in German musical theatre.

Germany has a big Stadttheater circuit – think of it as Rep theatre – where one is employed as a guest performer for a particular production. If all elements align it's possible to perform in two or three shows during a month in different theatres and different cities or as I once experienced, countries!! That proved a little challenging to say the least.



I'd been cast as Rocky in *The Rocky Horror Show* in Ingolstadt, Germany, and as Hud in the Bolzano theatre production of *Hair* in Italy. It turned out, as I

checked through the dates, that there were performances of both shows on the same day! *Hair* at 10:00am for a special school audience in the morning, after which I had to drive to Innsbruck to catch the train to Munich and a bus to Ingolstadt to play *The Rocky Horror Show* at 7:30pm. The travel from Italy to Germany was as smooth as my shaven head, but, once the show finished at 10:30pm I had to make the reverse trip in order to be in Bolzano for a double show performance, the first show beginning at 10:00am, again a presentation for schools in the region.

All was going well until my train was delayed and I was not able to get the connection. I was stuck on the platform of a little German village at 3:00am in the morning thinking of how I would get out of this situation and still be fresh to perform. I sent a text message to the intendant (Theatre manager), who remarkably called me at that early hour and arranged for me to meet him in Innsbruck once the next connecting train arrived there at 8:45am. That meant that he had to make the 90-minute car journey to Bolzano in 75 minutes or less in order for me to be ready to start the show at 10:00am!! By the grace of God and some Lewis Hamilton-esque driving skills, we made it with seconds to spare!!

Over the years I've been fortunate to be involved in a variety of productions; *Grand Hotel* (Jimmy 1), *Once on this Island* (Armund), *Ragtime* (Booker T Washington) to name a few and two world premieres, namely *The Chronicles of the Immortal*,



based on a series of novels by the German author Wolfgang Holbein and *Rocky* based on the Sylvester Stallone movie of the same title.

The audition process for *Rocky* was intense. I was to be seen for the role of Apollo Creed. For those of you how don't know the movie, he's the heavyweight boxing champion who gives the underdog Rocky a shot at the title. The first few auditions were quite straightforward, singing and scene work. The next few rounds (pun intended) were focused on movement and boxing, with the finals being a whole day process of everything! I was eventually cast as the Walk-in Cover for Apollo and Apollo's Manager. That meant that I would only have to be in the theatre in the case of an emergency, sickness or holidays, otherwise, because of my proximity to the theatre, I could cover at home!!



I must add that I was almost out for the count (the puns keep coming) in the first round of auditions! As I started to sing the Apollo song 'Patriotic' I got out the first line and then my head became as empty as a eunuch's underpants...!! In an instant I started walking towards the door, much to the bemusement of the audition panel. Opening the door, I looked out and said to the aforementioned panel over my shoulder, "OJ is just arriving and will

be with you shortly!!" Fortunately for me the room erupted with laughter and with my second chance I delivered a (brace yourselves for the final pun) knockout audition!!! Of course, it was a risky move, but as I said earlier, if there is no risk, there is no reward!!!

At present, like many performers of the arts around the world, I'm currently at home wondering when I'll be able to step on stage again. About five weeks before the first German lockdown I'd returned to *The Lion King*, this time as principal Mufasa!

I hope that I'll have the opportunity to inhabit the character again in the not too distant future and also return to post-Brexit England to see young and old friends on the Hippodrome stage in BLOC productions.



As The King in BLOC's *The King and I*

“Sounds easy, no?” Choosing a Show (Part One) by Alex Turasiewicz

*Choose a show that's Hippodrome-proof...
Sounds easy, no?
But try it! In our little BLOC committee
you might say
every one of us finds it hard, and that's the truth!
Trying to find a show that's licensable and sellable,
with parts for principals and enough ensemble
numbers with catchy tunes ...
without breaking the bank.
It isn't easy.
You may ask
why do we stay there
if it's so financially dangerous?
Well, we stay because
The Hippodrome is our home.
And how do we keep our balance
between fun and finance?
That I can tell you in two words!
BLOC Tradition!*

(With thanks to Phil Hallworth and apologies to Tevye...)

“Choosing the next BLOC show is the most important and at the same time the most difficult decision the Committee have to make.” These are the words of Andrew Carpenter at a recent Committee Meeting and they have been echoed by many Chairs over the years. So much rests on this one decision. Recently on behalf of BLOC I contacted all the rights holders to see if anything new was coming up that would be suitable for BLOC - and therein is the conundrum as BLOC has its own unique challenges. There are lots of websites that list hundreds of shows many of which I have never heard of and wonderful as these shows might be, they wouldn't fill a 1939-seater Theatre. Here was my first surprise. I had never considered that because we play The Hippodrome,

some shows would be denied us that are available for smaller venues. The reason is of course that professional companies may tour with the show to The Hippodrome. I had several conversations where if we were prepared to play to 50% capacity, we might be considered but that doesn't make any financial sense.

There are four main criteria for choosing a show.

Availability. Is the show available to perform and can BLOC obtain a license for it? It is easy to become excited by a Title only to find it can be performed in Europe or Australia but not here! So many shows have in small print – “not currently available in the UK”. If a show becomes available and it's not a show everyone knows, the Committee needs to read and listen to it, so by the time we apply the chance may have been missed and it has become unavailable. Copyright holders try to be very fair and usually there is a 50-mile radius restriction, so timing is everything and a delayed phone call could cost us our first choice. Imagine the scramble there will be when *Les Misérables* or *Mamma Mia* are released.

Suitability for the Company. Is it a BLOC show? A lot of modern shows are not written for a large ensemble. The cost is too prohibitive for professional companies. Some of the hit shows in the West End that have been closed down during Lockdown, such as *Book of Mormon*, *Come from Away*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Everybody's Talking about Jamie*, *Hamilton*, *The Lion King*, *Six*, *Tina* and *Waitress* are shows that, in my opinion, will never be suitable as a BLOC show. Some are too small and some have a new issue for Clubs and that is racial mix. Years ago, BLOC performed *Showboat*, a fantastic musical which we would not contemplate performing now. Frome performed *Hairspray* without one black member in the cast. *Kiss Me, Kate* has challenges for a contemporary Director because of the changes in social attitudes – it is interesting to consider the effects that our raised consciousness will have on future choices. Also, what demands will copyright holders make on Clubs? So how do we break out of the cycle of a

limited range of popular choices? In the West End or on Broadway a revival will often centre around a star – *Hello Dolly!* in New York the star was Bette Midler. The production was virtually the original and it was the 'star' that made it a success. Without a star, will an old musical succeed? The last time *Hello Dolly!* came to The Hippodrome it didn't do good business. *The Producers* tour - a show done by several local amateur groups - was pulled twice due to lack of pre-sales. These would be great Club shows but are they great Box Office; and which shows that are not part of the established canon can we take a punt on?

Box Office/Costs. This is an enormous factor as the risks are very high and one poor Box Office experience could wipe the Club out, no matter how good the production. Different shows have different potential expense. Is there flying required; are there lots of costume changes; are there children that will need chaperoning? All these have cost implications. Sometimes BLOC has been fortunate to be offered shows as part of a privileged group being given the first opportunity to perform in the region. Such shows were *Evita* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. In the case of *Chitty*, the Committee had already decided on *Guys and Dolls* and very quickly a decision had to be made whether to go for *Chitty* or play safe. It was felt that there was more chance of success at the Box Office with *Chitty* as well as it being a new show for the Club. However, it is a challenging call, as *Sunset Boulevard* proved. This show was offered to the Club by The Really Useful Group and although the show was an artistic success it was not a financial one. Every year the choice of show is a bit of a gamble – one on which Graham, our Treasurer and financial adviser, carefully tries to predict the odds and keep them in our favour.

The Bristol Hippodrome. Whatever show we choose, we have to compliment the programming of The Hippodrome. As a number one touring house, they stage up to 40 different productions a year. Producers have changed their approach as shows used to close in the West End and then go on tour. Now tours often happen simultaneously

while the West End production continues. This means newish and popular shows are coming to Bristol and attracting large audiences and our show has to be appealing enough amongst this myriad of choices. The Hippodrome therefore has to agree our choice and feel it has the potential to be successful. Often when we propose a more traditional show this is well received, as it contrasts with the other productions they have in their programme.

Once we feel we have a show that meets these criteria – Available/Suitable/Box Office Potential/Hippodrome Attractive - we then apply formally to the rights holders.

In order to give you a professional insight into this, I am indebted to **Ryan Macaulay** at **Music Theatre International (MTI,)** who willingly agreed to answer my questions about the process from the right holder's perspective.

Q. An introduction - it would be really interesting to learn a little about you so please tell us about yourself: your involvement with the arts, MTI and any changes from Joseph Weinberger's to MTI? The joys of the job, issues created by COVID-19 etc.

A. "I joined the MTI team in 2006 after graduating from the University of Leeds with a degree in Music Theatre. I worked in various departments of the hire library before joining the amateur licensing team in 2010 and am now MTI Europe's Director of Operations, Education and Development.

"In 2016 I produced the first Junior Theatre Celebration at Curve in Leicester. The annual event has grown to become the Junior Theatre Festival Europe, Europe's biggest celebration of musical theatre for young people and I am proud to produce this event on behalf of MTI.

"Outside of MTI, I am a passionate musical director and pianist and have been involved with a number of societies across London. I seem to be steadily working my way through the MTI catalogue of

shows, having been involved in productions of: *A, Disney's Beauty and the Beast, Hairspray, Into The Woods, Jekyll and Hyde, Legally Blonde, Little Shop of Horrors, Ragtime (NODA London Best Musical), Rent, Tick Tick...Boom!, Little Women*, and many more"

Q. What is the role of the Licensee? Protecting the works... the writers' income... or...?

A. "A rights holder has a number of functions. We exist to protect and exploit the work of our writers by licensing productions of their shows to schools, amateur societies and professionals. As well as ensuring that all productions are licensed (Copyright law prohibits the performance of any work without the owners' permission) we also provide the author-approved materials (script, scores etc.) to ensure that the authors' intentions are being performed on stage. We collect royalties for all productions we license that are then paid to the writers and owners of the show. We are also here to assist you, the groups, schools and producers putting on the shows. We want to make it as easy as possible for you to do the thing you love so much and will always try to help if you're struggling to find a show that might be suitable/available. Our licensing team has years of experience and knows our musicals inside and out."

Q. What are the advantages and disadvantages of applying to perform in a large venue?

A. "Applying for a licence to stage a production in a large venue such as the Hippodrome can be problematic for amateur groups. Here in the UK we are fortunate enough to have a vibrant musical theatre touring scene – musical theatre is more popular than ever. With this in mind, professional producers have obtained touring rights to a large number of our shows, many of them are blockbuster/family titles. The professional contracts usually prevent our ability to license amateur productions in the large touring venues."

Q. If a show is available what are the criteria for you saying yes?

A. "MTI will always want to say 'yes'. If rights are available for a given show and there are no conflicts (tour being planned, professional production nearby etc.) then we would usually be able to find a way to say 'yes'."

Q. Why are some shows available in Europe, America and Australia but not here?

A. "A show usually starts life as what's known as a 'first class' production. That first-class production is usually the original West End/Broadway version of the show. Producers of that production will try to mount their own version of the show internationally. Once a producer has 'finished' in any given country/region, they will relinquish their right to 'first class' in that region and that's when we can start exploiting 'secondary' licensing (which is what MTI does). For shows that start on Broadway, an amateur release in the UK will likely be many years after a release in America. That's mostly down to timescales. America already has a 'head start' because the show started there."

Q. How often do Licensees visit a production? Do they ever close them down or demand changes?

A. "We do try to see as much as we can and will always try, if invited, to make a trip to see a group's production. The main purpose of a visit would be to meet the group and to support what they're doing. We don't turn up with a script and check that everything is as it should be. That's not to say we're not aware of what's going on – we know our shows very well so can spot if something major has been changed. We would always seek to engage in a dialogue with groups and insist that the show be performed 'as written' before having to take excessive action."

Q. What happens to the Royalties?

A. “Royalties are paid to the authors and owners of a show. Royalties for some shows might be paid to just two writers. Royalties for other shows could be paid to writers, original producers, original directors and many more – it really does depend on the show.”

Q. Post-show, MTI ask for a programme. Does it just get filed or is it read? Is there a report to the Copyright Holders? Who actually holds that... MTI or the writers?

A. “We do try to read all the programmes we receive, not least because we’re all musical theatre lovers too and love to see what’s going on! Occasionally we will report successful, large-scale productions of amateur shows to the relevant owners of the show.”

Q. Finally, what major changes have you noticed during your time with the Company in the nature of shows being performed and the frequency of productions or anything else

A. “Most groups across the UK have become far less adventurous in what shows they want to do. The ‘Box Office appeal’ of a title now seems to be the most important factor for groups when they select a show. Gone are the days of a group being able to select a lesser-performed show and their loyal audience would turn up. There’s much more choice out there, which means groups have had to start giving audiences the big blockbuster titles. Personally, I think it’s a shame, but I understand the economics of it when the amateur theatre model means that productions are funded by ticket sales. We look after about 400 shows and 20 of those shows account for about 60% of what we license each year. Everyone seems to be picking from the same, very small, pool of shows. Inevitably there will be disappointment somewhere.”



Jack's *BLOG* to *BLOC* by Jack Blackmore



Well, it didn't take long but I'm back in the **Bailiwick**! I've been asked to write a Blog about my time at Guildford School of Acting (GSA) whilst I'm completing my MA Acting course (part sponsored by the BLOC Foundation) over what is probably a very strange time: what I'm learning, what I'm experiencing and, ultimately, how I'm finding it all.

Now it's worth pointing out that going into the course, we were told that we would be in the studio no matter what – the show must go on! Well, that was until the Saturday before I started when schools were suggested to not be heading back: I was no longer going to be in the studio apart from a select few classes where the hybrid teaching method meant I could use the sprung floorboards where that would be more beneficial than my Tetris

block shaped space of floor. As I'm sure you all remember (or likely try to forget), Monday 4th January was my first day on the course I dreamed about since I was 12 and was also the first day of our third nationwide lockdown. From Monday onwards, everything we did in this course would be online. I was lucky that I had moved in with two other people on my course: Becky and Yuya. We had each other to support and remind each other of everything we had going on and help get through the initial throws of a brand-new course!

This first term has mainly been focused on Shakespeare and understanding the text. I've worked on three separate monologues (two of my own choosing from *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming Of The Shrew* and one picked with my tutor from *Henry IV Part 2*); a duologue from *Julius Caesar* (although that was paired with me, Becky, and Yuya so it was more of a "triologue" and we were able to do that in our living room); and the tools Shakespearean actors utilise such as figures of balance, figures of contraction, and figures of contrast. The concept I've most engaged with is the performance of the text. Having previously studied Shakespeare in my English Literature degree, it has been a different thing entirely in knowing how to utilise the iambic pentameter that Shakespeare is famous for and when to follow the enjambment* of the text itself.

Further to Shakespeare, I have been taught for the first time about the art of acting for screen. I've really been enjoying this as we have been focusing on the little details of the body that you might not take into account all the time. We had an exercise to tell a story and watch ourselves back and upon reviewing you notice the ticks we as people have when we might pause or feel uncomfortable in remembering story points. We have then been utilising this when we have been working on our self-tapes, which has been a weekly exercise to help develop that skill too.

I have only given a flavour for now and will update with more of the classes in my next blog. Also, now that we have been given the go ahead to start

doing some of the movement classes in the space at GSA, it should be very exciting to discuss the differences of online vs in person teaching. I'm missing you all dearly but am having such a thrill in finally pursuing my dream. Here is to lockdown ending soon so I can get properly stuck in and BLOC can get back to doing what it does best: rocking the Hippodrome stage!

*noun: **enjambment**

(in verse) the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza.

From the Wings

This is a regular column providing news within the BLOC family, with apologies for any omissions.

Richard Hayes

We were very sorry to learn of the death of one of our long-standing Patrons, Richard Hayes. Our thoughts are with Anne, Vicky and all the family.

Chris Sterry

Congratulations to Chris Sterry on his election to the Committee at the AGM. Chris writes: "I moved to Bristol in 2014 and I've been involved in Bristol's amateur theatre since BLOC's production of *My Fair Lady* in 2017, this being my first time singing and dancing on stage, at 27 years old, and what a production to start on! I absolutely loved the experience and I've been hooked ever since. Before I decided to take a chance at a musical, I'd been in a number of plays (normally Shakespeare) and had a few speaking parts in various shows around the south west, mostly in my home city of Gloucester, and once in London. I worked front of House at The Bristol Hippodrome for five years after moving to the city, it was an incredible experience. I forged a lot of friendships whilst I was there and learnt a great deal about how theatres

are run and the current state of the theatre industry. BLOC has such an incredible community and I've made many fond memories since joining, so now I hope to give a little something back by joining the committee."



NODA Long Service Awards

At the AGM we were introduced to the NODA SW representative, Debi Weaver, who said a few words before citations were read out and NODA Long Service Medals/Bars awarded to:

- **10 Years:** Peter Jones
- **25 Years:** Helen Kempe & Anna Sutton
- **40 Years:** Carol Davies & Sue Donovan
- **50 Years:** Eric Arnold, Alison Sutton, Peter Sutton & Andrew Carpenter

The intention is that these awards become an annual feature in the BLOC calendar.

Calling junior performers! BMYP (formerly Junior BLOC) will be performing the junior version of Disney's *Aladdin* in November and are looking for new members. If you have a relative, friend or neighbour aged between 11 and 19 who you think might be interested in auditioning for membership, please ask them to get in touch with Chris Parslow at chrisparslow5@gmail.com