



BLOC Bailiwick

IN THIS ISSUE

- **Chairman's Overture**
by Andrew Carpenter
- **View from The Royal Box** (a.k.a. Ian Taylor's sofa)
- **BLOC Exposed**
by Stewart McPherson
- **Chitty at the Palladium**
by Ben Stock
- **Desert Island Shows**
by Anna Sutton
- **From BLOC to Bochum**
by Matt Ramplin
- **"Oh No I'm Not... (in panto this year)"**
by Ben Stock



Editorial by Phil Hallworth

Bailiwick is under new management!

Firstly, our sincere thanks to Jack Blackmore, Anna Sutton, Ewan Poole-Gleed and Alex Turasiewicz for conceiving and launching Bailiwick back in 2017 and for producing so many entertaining editions since then. Alex is happily still with us and is joined on the editorial team by Phil Hallworth (Editor), Andrew Carpenter, Kathie Cooke, Chris Parslow and Jo Phillips.

This edition includes a wide variety of articles which I hope you will find interesting and informative. Our Chairman, Andrew Carpenter, updates us on what the committee has been doing in the last few months and on his hopes for 2021; Ian Taylor recommends some great alternatives to live theatre; Ben Stock reflects fondly on his experiences in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* at the Palladium and then writes about the impact of Covid-19 on the pantomime industry; Anna Sutton presents her eight Desert Island Shows; Matt Ramplin gives a fascinating insight into *Starlight Express* in Germany and Stewart McPherson shares his special view of BLOC shows as captured through his camera lenses over the years. Finally, the twelve new members we are desperate to meet are introduced and there is news of former and current members. So, I hope there's something here for everyone!

If you have any feedback on this edition and the new digital format, or suggestions for future editions, please get in touch with us at: editorial@blocproductions.co.uk



Chairman's Overture by Andrew Carpenter



Our world of amateur musical theatre continues to be a place of uncertainty when a return to 'normal life' is still unknown. I am sure, like me, we are all hoping, wishing and praying for the day when we can all return to doing the thing we love most, involving ourselves with rehearsing, managing and performing those fabulous productions. The lockdown has given us all time to contemplate and now even more we recognise the importance of amateur theatre to the good of the nation generally and our own mental health in particular. I feel particularly sorry for those who rely on the world of performing arts to make a living as the sector has understandably been decimated. I hope for their sake our return is soon.

Your committee has been using the downtime to continue its work on our internal structure. Of note since the last **Bailiwick** has been the survey issued by Pete Jones. I am delighted to say that we received a 60% response from our membership together with

replies from Life Members, Patrons and others associated with BLOC Productions and I thank you all for your time and effort. We were particularly pleased to receive six volunteers to join the committee and 15 Interested in directing & choreographing. With the former in mind the next AGM is only four months away and with the latter in mind the committee has agreed to run workshops for those interested as soon as we are able. If this fits in with his busy diary, we will do this in association with the workshop Kevin Clifton promised us during his member webinar. Other responses regarding props, costumes, scenery and get-in/get-out etc. have all been noted and you will be hearing from Pete in due course.

The survey led us to think that we should arrange a series of online meetings whereby members can express their views, ask questions, and propose ideas. To this end, Alex T and I will be facilitating a series of Monday night surgeries, early in the New Year, to do just that. You may have views on "What is BLOC?" (recently communicated), auditions, choice of shows, rehearsal periods etc. or anything else appertaining to BLOC Productions. I'm a big fan of any organisation of which I'm part being 'for the members, by the members' and this proposal will further that culture.

I think we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the committee for keeping things going during very difficult times and I would like to pass on my thanks to each one of them. Our regular online meetings have been keeping abreast of everything coronavirus related in our efforts to make sense of when we might perform *Kiss Me, Kate*. Full details of our Plans A, B & C will have already been communicated to you. I would like to pay particular thanks to Jo, Kathie, Phil, Ian and John for providing some excellent online quizzes and Brendan for organising our BLOC Lockdown Choir, the results of which we will see on Monday 14th December at our online Carol Service. With the Carol Service in mind our sincere thanks go to Carrie, Lucy, and Pete for organising this traditional event in such an imaginative way.

Rest assured that with my 'producer' hat on we are doing all we can to ensure that when we are all 'released' we can start work on *Kiss Me, Kate* ASAP. My thanks to John, Brendan, Donna, Peter, and Sam for the ongoing meetings (in person and more latterly online) to ensure that when the time is right, we are good to go. I am very excited hearing about what your creative team has in mind and I know you will be too once we have the chance to share it with you. Just think how good that time will be and hold it in your mind this winter.

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

2020 has wrought havoc with our beloved live theatre. Not only was BLOC's production of *Kiss Me, Kate* shelved for 12 months, but countless others have been cancelled altogether. Personally, I've had to reschedule 29 theatrical bookings because of the ongoing pandemic and have only managed to watch six live performances - *Book of Mormon*, *Mame*, *Six*, *Legally Blonde*, *Camelot* and *Betrayal*.

As a result, this year's theatrical fixes have had to be experienced from the comfort of my own sofa – watching streamed productions or hidden gems found on You Tube. I've watched all the NT live productions, Netflix and Disney specials but have not included any of them in the list. I thought instead that I'd recommend some more unusual highlights, all of which I enjoyed in very different ways. I highly recommend each and every one of them.

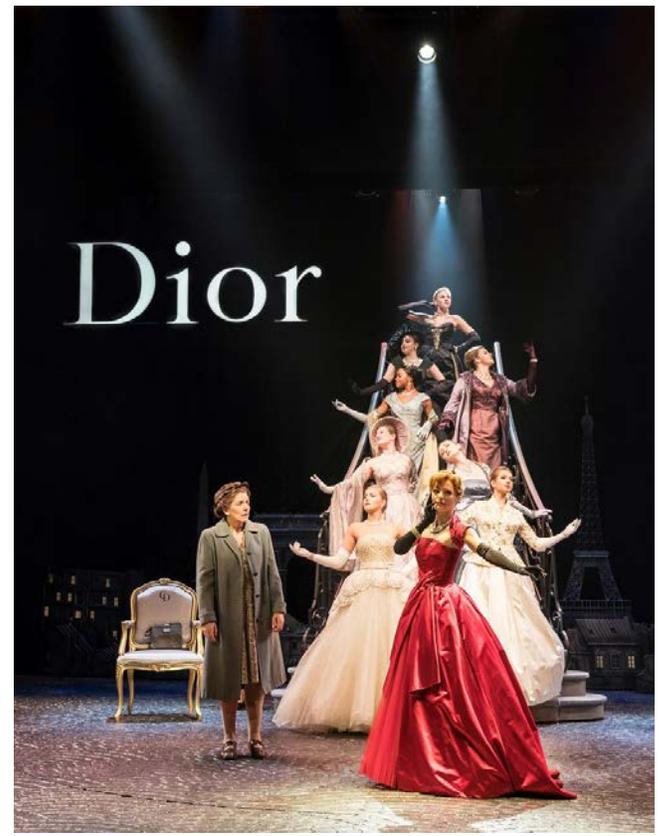
SHE LOVES ME

Currently available to watch on Broadway HD and starring Zach Levi, Laura Benanti, Jane Krakowski and Gavin Creel, *SHE LOVES ME* is one of Broadway's best kept secrets. It's an almost perfect romantic musical comedy with a soaring score written by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. Amalia and Georg work together at a modest Hungarian parfumerie and have disliked each other from the very beginning. He thinks she's stuck up, and she thinks he's arrogant and mean. But each rapturously writes unknowingly to the other as a lonely-hearts pen pal when the work day is done, and it doesn't take long for the audience to see that they've fallen in love without realising it.

FLOWERS FOR MRS HARRIS

Available to stream via the Chichester Festival Theatre website, this is the 2018 Chichester Festival production directed by Daniel Evans, with a cast led by Clare Burt, Joanna Riding and Gary

Wilmot. The beguiling musical *FLOWERS FOR MRS HARRIS* is the story of Ada Harris, a charlady in post-war London whose drab life of dusting and scrubbing is transformed when she glimpses a Christian Dior dress in one of her client's wardrobes and sets her heart on going to Paris to buy one for herself.



THE HIRED MAN

Streaming courtesy of the Hull Truck Theatre Company, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and Oldham Coliseum, this is a soaring and foot-stomping musical by Howard Goodall based on Melvyn Bragg's novel. Set in Cumbria in 1898 – where whippet racing and hiring fairs collide with hunting and drunken antics - this is a passionate story of John and Emily, a young married couple, and their moving struggle to carve a living from the land. It is also an epic and heroic tale of love, betrayal and loyalty, set against a backdrop of

English country traditions being swept away as a new century arrives and brings with it the gathering storm of a world war.

**LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER /
LINCOLN CENTER AT HOME
(YOU TUBE)**

The Lincoln Center theatre in New York - America's equivalent of the National Theatre - has streamed a number of outstanding productions free of charge, some of which are still available to watch on their You Tube channel:

THE NANCE

Nominated for three Tony Awards, this celebrated play by Douglas Carter Beane is both a love letter to the grand old days of burlesque and, before its time, a story of forbidden love. Nathan Lane gives the performance of a lifetime as Chauncey Miles, a burlesque comedian caught between the tug of his heart, the calling of his art and the increasingly harsh realities of Depression era politics and contemporary social norms.



CAROUSEL

A semi-staged concert version of the R&H classic wife-beater musical epic, this beautifully sung, danced and ultimately uplifting production stars Kelli O'Hara, Jessie Mueller and Shuler Hensley.

ACT ONE

Growing up in an impoverished immigrant family in the Bronx, Moss Hart dreamed of being part of the glamorous, magical world of show business. From dropping out of school to becoming the toast of the town, his autobiography ACT ONE recounts the making of a Broadway legend. Wonderfully adapted for the stage by James Lapine, a cast of 22 delivers the goods in this funny, heart-breaking and suspenseful portrait of the artist as a young man.

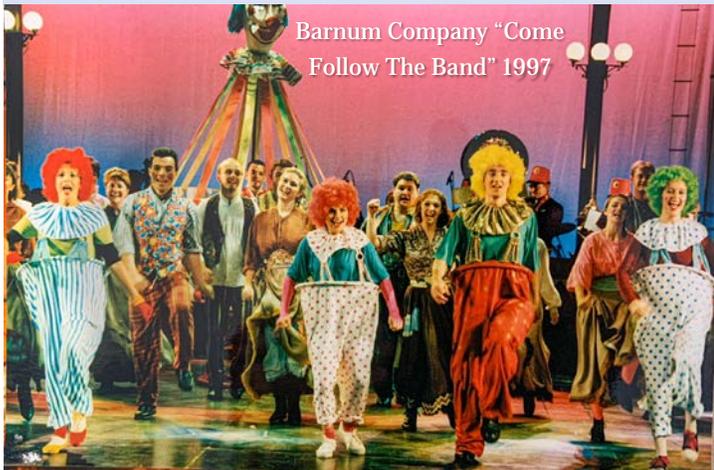


For the next edition I'll choose one or two productions to review in more depth – but for now, I hope you enjoy the recommendations as much as I did.

Gin, tonic, nibbles and velvet housecoats at the ready... I wish you happy viewing.

Ian x

BLOC Exposed by *Stewart McPherson*



Barnum Company "Come
Follow The Band" 1997

"...what's it like being a Theatre Photographer"

I'm glad you asked...

When I was approached to put together a series of 'articles' to illustrate my time as BLOC's photographer I thought .."that'll be easy" and then, when I finally

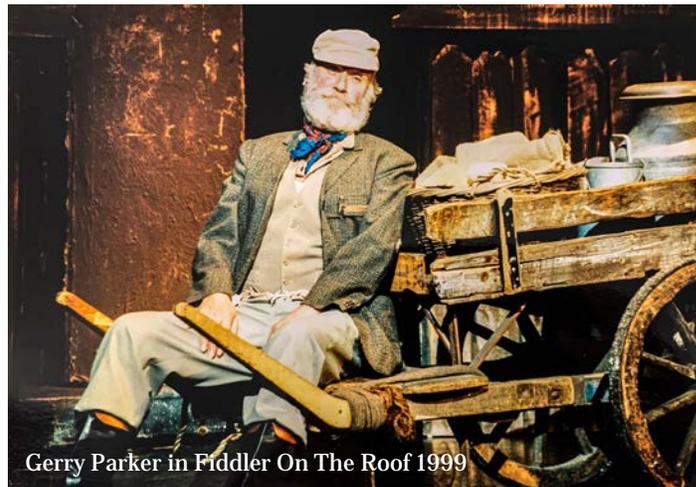
sat down to write instalment #1 I realised there is much more to my journey to where I find myself in 2020 than I thought (apart from out of work..!!!)

My association with BLOC started thirty two years ago back in 1988 when I joined as a dancer for Oklahoma and I performed for four years followed by a gap of nine years until I trod the boards again in 2001 for Evita and 2002 for Jesus Christ Superstar. I can honestly say I have always enjoyed my time working with and for BLOC and the productions have always provided visual challenges and successes in equal measure.



Chris Greaves & Julia
Kennedy in Barnum 1997

I started photographing theatre in general around 1992 mostly because the other photographer around at the time shot whole stage images not close up character shots and made the entire production look a bit like a Lowry painting..!!! Without being conceited, I felt there was a better way and I set out to give it a go - here we are 28 years on and I'm still trying (I'm nothing if not tenacious).



Gerry Parker in Fiddler On The Roof 1999

The first production I shot for BLOC was Anything Goes in 1996 and whilst today everybody snaps away and produces some reasonable shots, without sounding too dull, back then it was a very different process. Modern digital technology has made the kit much more flexible to the point where any idiot could use a digital camera (and many do..!!!) - a lifetime ago when I started everything was on film (anyone remember that?) with very limited flexibility - I would ask the lighting designer to give me an average lighting state, take a meter reading on a handheld light meter, base everything I shot on that and..... pray.

Images often ended up very dark or follow spot would completely white out faces and freezing dance routines was nigh on impossible without blur. Looking back at my old work I'm amazed I kept going. I guess most of the time I got lucky, in



Merion Ashton in
Fiddler On The Roof 1997

fact the more I practiced the luckier I got!!! and the rest as they say is history.

Brian Harding & Sylvia Jordan in Anything Goes 1996



I'm absolutely sure you would all rather see some evidence rather than my wittering on so throughout this article I have illustrated my ramblings with some archive images from Barnum, Fiddler On The Roof, Anything Goes and the only remaining image from the King & I - a few old familiar faces (some sorely missed).

At the last count I think I have shot twenty four productions for BLOC and designed the artwork for a reasonable number of their shows and I still love the thrill of a new challenge.

"Blow Gabriel" from Anything Goes 1996



Photographing in the theatre is like nothing else, as the photographer you have no control over the light and the only way to compose a shot is to move, often at speed, around the theatre to get the best angles, you also have to try where possible to make sure everyone is in at least one image! whilst watching the lighting, trying to read and pre-empt the action on stage to get in the best position, changing camera

settings in the dark and not tripping over the numerous cables draped throughout the auditorium during the dress run - it's easy when you know how - simply know your gear, get in the right place and practice for.... 20+ years -'simples no'..!!!!?

I'll try to explain a little more of my techniques and planning in the next instalment but until then if anyone has any questions or wants further info please feel free to email me directly through my website I'll be happy to help. 'Til next time...

Melanie Evans & Vicky Hartland in Anything Goes 1996



Louise Merrett & Kelly Packer in The King & I 1998



www.mcphersonphotography.co.uk

Chitty at the Palladium by Ben Stock



Firstly, thank you for asking me to contribute to your magazine. The first BLOC show I saw was *OKLAHOMA!* in the late 80's when I was a member of the then named Junior BLOC! I've seen many shows since and was sad to miss *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*... especially as I was lucky enough to spend 18 very happy months in the show at The London Palladium.

Alex T asked me to recollect memories from my time with the show and I've had to germinate this for a few weeks as I actually have the most terrible memory (except for learning lines!). So, these are a few hotch-potch vignettes from that very happy time.

LAUGHTER!

I remember laughing every day - it was such a happy company... onstage and backstage... mainly due to the escapades of a certain Christopher Biggins who played the Baron. You can only begin

to imagine the people who came to see him and he was (and still is) so generous in sharing his friends... Cilla, Cliff, Barbara Windsor, Joan Collins... the list went on and on. We used to play "Pass The Fish" on Sundays where a plastic fish is passed around the company onstage and you had to hold it for at least 10 seconds before passing it on... whoever had it as the curtain fell had to buy cake for the following week. We had fancy dress warm-ups - often judged by one of the aforementioned celebs... backstage games of "Hunt The Toot Sweet"... all encouraged and egged on by Biggins. This all sounds terribly unprofessional - but believe me - the show came first... these things just helped keep eight shows a week fresh!

EXTRA REHEARSALS!

NEVER-ENDING! I was second cover to Potts (never got on) and due to children employment laws the kids changed every four months... with two months rehearsal with the two teams (plus understudies). On top of that the Childcatcher changed at different periods to keep the publicity fresh (mine were Lionel Blair and the now sadly gone and dearly missed Stephen Gately and Alvin Stardust). I also worked with three Potts (Gary Willmott, Jason Donovan and Brian Conley) so more rehearsals there and on top of that we had our own weekly understudy calls and because the creative team were never satisfied with them - three different versions of the opening and two versions of *Me Ol' Bamboo*... with Gillian Lynne and Adrian Noble at the helm (even Biggins was on his best behaviour!). I think there were only about three weeks in the whole run where I purely did eight shows! I also used to teach two mornings a week. Good job I was young and fit!

THE CAR!

Oh dear me... the car! When it worked - it was quite honestly the most magical sight - especially from onstage where you could see the wonder in the audiences' eyes. At the time - with a price tag on



£1,000,000 it was the most expensive stage prop ever. Now to be fair, most of the time she worked perfectly - but she was a stubborn mistress! She gained the reputation and name "Martine". Any guesses why? Well... at the time, there was much publicity surrounding Martine McCutcheon missing shows in *My Fair Lady* across the river at The National. Rather unfair... but it seemed neither could be persuaded to go on if they chose not too...!



THE PALLADIUM

In my opinion The Palladium is quite simply the greatest theatre in the world! The building just reeks of history. It seats somewhere near 2,000

people - but somehow - due to its design and original intention to be a variety house - feels as intimate as The Redgrave! You feel almost hugged by it. There is a huge mirror just before you go into the wings on stage left and it was your last chance to check your costume... I was looking into it one show and someone said "imagine the faces who have looked back through that mirror"... it made me go cold... everyone from The Crazy Gang to Marie Lloyd and from Judy Garland to Elton John... magical!

SUNDAY BREAKFAST CLUB

We were one of the only shows to do Sunday matinees at the time and a tradition crept in of everyone meeting on Carnaby Street for breakfast. Cast, crew, wardrobe, wigs, front of house... it grew and grew. They were raucous, noisy, delicious and a great way to end the week. Happy times!

THE BAMBOO

It never got easier! I think I still have the costume somewhere...! It was a fab number to be in but my oh my it was hard work - I was just one of the "oldies" at the back doing a much simpler version! I remember in rehearsal reducing Gillian Lynne to tears of laughter as she told myself and my partner in crime Nigel Garton that we both looked like contestants from The Generation Game! We did improve with time... I hope!

Reading this back, I realise I've talked mostly about what happened offstage, but as with so many shows it's the people you are working with that stay with you. It was a real privilege to be in the show - and to meet and work with The Sherman Brothers, Gillian Lynne, Adrian Noble and so many other talented and lovely cast, crew, stage management, wardrobe, wigs, automation, creatives, musicians, management, front of house, wigs... have I left anyone out? They really were a very special 18 months... I now wish I'd kept a diary Thank you for helping me take this trip down memory lane and I hope you have as many happy memories of your "Fantasmagorical" show!

Desert Island Shows by Anna Sutton

Musical theatre has been in my life for as long as I can remember so it is only fitting that we start at the very beginning with ***The Sound of Music***. This was my very first show. Mum found herself hiding a large baby bump under the voluminous fabric of a habit being six months pregnant with me. 24 years later, I was lucky enough to be in the same show, this time on stage as nun alongside both my mum and big sister.

The King & I. Whilst *The Sound of Music* was my first show on stage, *The King & I* is the one that gave me my name! Family story is that mum and dad were struggling to come up with any girls' names when they went to see Yul Brynner in *The King & I*, and so when I came along Mrs Anna became just Anna. Sadly, although BLOC has performed it twice since I was born, on both occasions, I found myself studying and unable to perform myself. I did however get to create snowflakes for the ballet! I may never have performed in this show, but it will always be the show that makes me cry. 'Something Wonderful' sees me well up every time I hear it. It was this show that gave mum a Rose Bowl for Best Supporting Performance in a Musical playing Lady Thiang.

Carousel. This was the first show I remember being a part of, aged six. Alongside big sister Laura and children of other BLOC adults, I played one of the Snow Children. I remember having publicity photos taken on the waterfront and, most excitingly, the rush on stage every night to get to have a go on the full-sized working carousel.

42nd Street. This show really saw my life with BLOC begin. The rest of the family were involved in this production and rather than leave me alone every night, aged 14, I was drafted in to work as a dresser with the under-16 dancers under the stage. I remember listening to the thunderous tap opening and the mammoth quick change during the 'Dames' number. As a mover rather than a dancer I never thought I would get to perform in this show (BLOC had held open dance auditions) however, I was lucky enough to perform in it 18 years later with BAOS.



Anything Goes. Although there was not a lot to do once the show was running, at 16 I was allowed to join dad and this was my first show as part of his back stage crew. I had enjoyed my time as a dresser but wanted to do more and I discovered that this could be just as much fun as being on stage.

White Christmas. Having already said I would describe myself as more of a mover than a dancer, this show is special as it gave me the chance to be a dancer. I may not have been a featured dancer, but I was a secondary dancer and that meant a lot to



me. Although I have been performing on stage since I finished university, I have always managed to continue to be an active part of the back stage crew. *White Christmas* meant snow, which meant many opportunities for the crew to find ways of hiding it, usually in the pocket or bag of another unsuspecting member of the crew. We all discovered that fake snow is like glitter you just cannot get rid of it!

Sister Act. This show was special for so many reasons. From the moment that I heard the music, I loved it and having seen it in London I knew it was a show that would be amazing for BLOC. When it came to show week, everything came together. It was fantastic - the music, the lights, the costumes and the audiences. I will also never forget watching mum rap and get down as Sister Mary Lazarus, without doubt a performance I will remember forever.



2018 was to see me take part in my 25th show with BLOC and what a show it turned out to be. Therefore, my final choice has to be **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang**. Few shows that take you back to your childhood, but this is one of them. With masses of props, children and a flying car it was definitely a show with its challenges, but the look of wonder on my niece's face as Chitty flew makes you realise why you do it all. It was priceless.

If you could only take one show soundtrack with you? I could only take one show it would have to be *Sister Act*. Although, having finished the week, it took a long time to listen to the music again, as the post show blues had been particularly hard, it is still one of the few shows that I would do again in a heartbeat.

Best Bit of BLOC? With my family history, BLOC was always going to be part of my life. What I did not expect was just how big a part of mine it was going to be. BLOC has given me the opportunity to discover that I enjoy being backstage and the camaraderie that goes with it just as much as performing on stage. It has also been the starting place of some amazing friendships.

Highlight of being with BLOC? Performing at the Hippodrome is always special, looking out into a full audience is amazing, add in a standing ovation and it is incredible. *Sister Act* provided all of these.

Show I would Love BLOC to do: *Wicked* - amazing leads and great chorus numbers perfect show for BLOC.

Book apart from Shakespeare and the Bible? Not a huge reader, but the books that I can read repeatedly are the Harry Potter books so it would have to be that.

Luxury? This would have to be my sewing machine and fabric. Sewing is my way of relaxing and making time for me.



From BLOC to Bochum by Matt Ramplin



Dear BLOC members - Liebe Grüße aus Deutschland!

I was delighted to be asked if I'd be interested in writing something for **Bailiwick** about my post-BLOC experience in the theatre industry. I first worked with BLOC in 2012 as conductor for *Thanks for the Memories* and again a few years later as Musical Director of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Right now (and for the last four years!), I've been plying my trade as Musical Director of the long-running German version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express*. Since I've been mostly working in the same job since *Sunset* in 2015, I thought it might be fun to give you a little insider insight into the show here in Germany.

In 1987, after watching the West End production of *Starlight Express*, a group of German producers decided to use the money they'd made producing *Cats* in Hamburg to purpose build an

arena theatre in an ex-mining town called Bochum between Dortmund & Essen in north-west Germany. This was an unfathomable risk on behalf of the original production company that by modern commercial theatre standards is UNTHINKABLE! *Starlight* had seen large-scale success in London at the time and had been running for the best part of four years, however there was still no way for them to know if the show would be successful or not in Germany. Given that the average lifespan of a large-scale commercial musical is between 300-500 performances, looking back, they must have firmly believed that *Starlight* was going to become a huge hit.

Well it turns out they were right. Almost 33 years, 12,290 performances and nearly 19 million visitors later, *Starlight Express* in Bochum is still playing to full houses and amazing audiences eight times a week. *Starlight* Germany actually holds the Guinness world record for the most visitors ever to watch a

single musical in the same theatre as well as the auspicious honour of being the World's fourth longest-running musical behind *Les Miserables* (West-End), *Phantom* (West-End) and *Phantom* (Broadway).

The reason for its continued success in Germany? I'm often asked how it's kept going all these years. The show *has* had extended production runs elsewhere in the world - in London: 18 years (1984-2002), in Las Vegas: four years (1993-1997), Broadway: two years (1987-1989) and various UK, US & international tours, but these have all been respectively eclipsed by the German production. Why exactly? Well, simply put, the show here is unique.



At *Starlight*, it's not only the actors that are the stars of the show, so is the theatre and set. It really is a feat of engineering that must be seen to be believed. For those of you that remember the old Apollo Victoria set from the West-End production, the Bochum set was designed from the same plans but had none of the limitations of having to fit around pre-existing theatre infrastructure. In fact, the building was constructed around the set *after* it had been built! And thus, with what we can do on our stage, we like to think we're able to offer a little more than your average musical! Not only do you get a full sung-through musical, but also fully staged live races (no 3D projected films - for those of you who saw the last UK tour!), actors whizzing past your head at speeds of up to 40 km/h as well as some of the world's best in-line stunt skaters performing stunts less than a metre away from you!

The show also has a broad appeal never fails to resonate with people of all ages. Along with his darker, more mature shows like *Phantom*, *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, ALW is responsible for some of our best and most

loved "introductory shows" for younger audiences such as *Starlight*, *Joseph & Cats*. Ask yourselves, how many of you were taken to, or indeed took your children to see one of those shows as their first ever musical? For me, the first musical I ever saw was *Joseph* at the Bristol Hippodrome, followed shortly by a trip to London to see *Starlight Express*. These shows are important and will always be. As our taste in music matures, it becomes easy to poke holes and make fun of shows like *Starlight* but without them, how can musical theatre expect to engage with younger audiences?

Lastly and most importantly, throughout *Starlight's* 36-year lifespan, it has been constantly reinvented. Just visit the show's Wikipedia article for a brief look at how much the show has changed over the years! ALW firmly believes that the musical success of the show is linked to its ability to change and reflect ever-changing musical trends. For that reason, he tends to revisit the show every five years or so to make tweaks or changes to the score that he feels keep it "up to date". I was lucky enough to be working as part of the team in 2018 when Andrew decided to do just that and revamp the show for the German 30th Anniversary.



Working in the music department alongside Andrew was a once in a lifetime experience. Even into his 70s, he has retained a sharpness and vision that borders on genius at times. Watching him sitting at the piano composing or trying to find a solution to a musical problem is truly inspiring and his passion and love for his shows is always plain to see. Conducting the opening night of the new *Starlight Express* in June 2018 with Andrew, Trevor Nunn, Richard

Stilgoe & John Napier (designer) in the audience was a real honour and one that I'll never forget. Closely followed by the new revamped *Starlight* winning the "Best Musical" award at the German equivalent of the Olivier Awards in 2019!



Outside of those special moments at *Starlight*, there's rarely a dull day! We usually have an international cast made up of performers from the UK, USA, Germany, Austria, Australia, Holland, France & Sweden to name but a few. When they arrive, most of the actors have little to no experience on roller skates and varying levels of ability with the German language. They have from February to June to perfect these skills to a professional level and they must all be tested and "cleared" by our in-house team before they can perform in the show. Their training usually begins with eight weeks of intensive skate school, Monday-Saturday from 9am-6pm. On their one day off a week, we expect them to be practising their German phonetics in preparation for their lessons with our in-house German language department. All of this, before they even start learning any of the music, blocking or choreography for the show! If you ever have a chance to speak to an actor who's been through the training for *Starlight Express* Germany it's likely that they'll tell you it's the hardest thing they've ever done in their career! On average, one out of every ten performers does not to make it through the training here and as intense as this may sound, it is of the utmost importance, for their own safety that we prepare our performers properly for the challenges of the show. Alongside performing a sung-through musical in German, they are expected to skate anywhere between 5-10km eight times a week and four times on weekends.

As I'm sure you can imagine, with this intense performance and training regime we are sometimes forced to navigate short and long-term injuries as well as rest periods, off shows and annual leave. To combat this, *Starlight* is again unique within the theatre world - in addition to the 24 onstage cast members we have 16 offstage swings! These swings all understudy/cover multiple roles within the show, (some up to 12 or 13!) and are expected to learn all the different choreography, harmony lines and positioning for each individual role. Most shows will have two (sometimes three in special circumstances) understudies/covers for each principal role, we have five (sometimes six) and they almost always end up onstage at some point!!! You may find this difficult to believe but I've been working at *Starlight* for four and a half years now, I've conducted/played over 1,000 shows and not once have I ever had a show with the entire 1st cast line-up onstage (including the 30th anniversary opening night!). As crazy as that may sound, that's simply part of *Starlight Express*!

Starlight is one of a kind and truth be told, that's the main reason I've stayed for as long as I have. Every day has a different set of challenges to navigate, problems to solve and stories that few will believe. I've often tried to tell colleagues of mine working on other shows in the industry about the things that happen at *Starlight* and most of the time they tell me it sounds mad. But that's *Starlight*. It's unique onstage so it stands to reason that it should be unique offstage!!!

Sadly, as with all live theatre at the moment, we've been hit hard by the Coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe and have been forced to close our doors. All things being well though, our production company has scheduled a restart for April 2021 and we remain hopeful that not just *Starlight* but the entire theatre industry and most importantly for you all, BLOC will return stronger and better than ever in the new year. Until then, wear a mask, wash your hands and stay healthy!

Auf wiedersehen!
Matt

“Oh No I’m Not...(in panto this year)” by Ben Stock

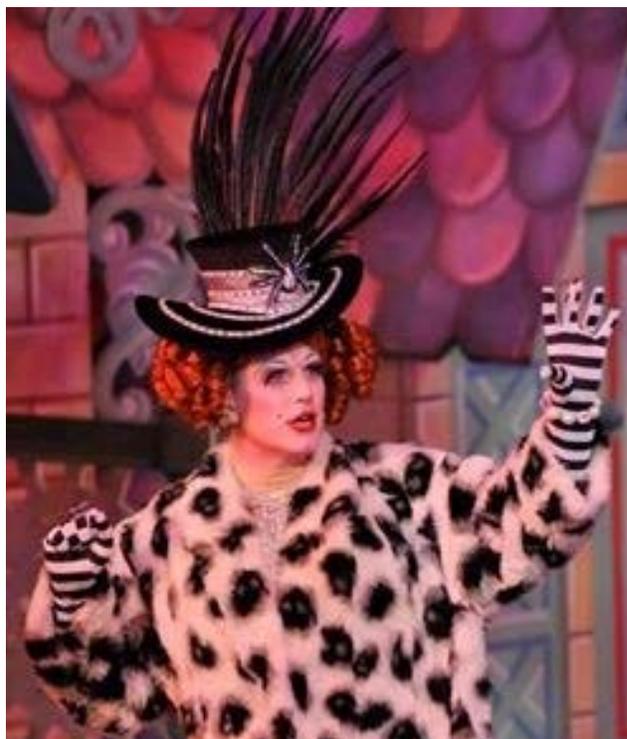
It’s nearly time for panto! “Oh yes it is!” Well... actually this year... “Oh no it isn’t!” Normally at this time of year (and only this time of year) my thoughts are turning to eyelashes, pumpkins, theatrical digs, National Treasures and tights!



Let me explain! For the last 11 consecutive years I have played Ugly Sister in *Cinderella* around the UK. From Hastings to High Wycombe, Bradford to Bristol and Wolverhampton to Northampton, I’ve locked Cinderella in wardrobes, cellars, magical mirrors, torn up her invitation to the ball over a thousand times and at approximately 8 costume changes a show have been popped, zipped and velcro-ed during over 8,000 costume changes! Well known faces such as Lynda Bellingham, Gok Wan,

Lesley Joseph, Brian Conley, The Krankies, Julian Clary and Brendan from Coach Trip have become work mates and pre-matinee breakfast buddies. Christmas Eve dashes to get home have become the norm and Boxing Day Secret Santa has rooted itself in my heart as my least-favourite Christmas tradition. (Forcing a smile when opening your fairy wings and face paints from Poundland for the umpteenth time gets harder!)

But this year is different. Although a few theatres are (thankfully) opening small-scale shows with socially distanced audiences, I will be having as ‘normal’ a Christmas as anyone else this year... and it feels very odd! I’ve been working in the theatre for 22 years and this will be the first time I’ve had more than a day off in that time. I don’t normally ‘notice’ Christmas... don’t get me wrong... I LOVE Christmas... but it is literally a day off and so is quite simple to plan! This year (depending on what we can and can’t do) I have to plan stuff and can’t get away with skipping the washing up and prep which I have to say I always get out of by playing the “but I’ve done 12 shows this week” card...!



On a personal level, I will of course miss panto so much! I love the routine; trimming up the dressing room and digs; finding treats for the company; doing a jigsaw in my dressing room between entrances; not to mention THE MONEY! You see, as a self-employed freelancer, panto is a big gig! Don't get me wrong... it's not the mega-bucks for us jobbing "turns" that often get reported in the media (I really must get my agent to sort me a stint on MADE IN CHELSEA!), but it's an important part of my working year in every way. Just like it is for the theatres themselves. Most theatres make about a third of their income for the year during the panto season. But perhaps more importantly, it's often the only time many people come into the theatre. Kids come with school or Cubs or Brownies; care homes and day centres bring groups of our older friends; families come in groups of multi-generations. For me this is the real sadness this year. And of course, the people. Being in one theatre for several weeks, you get to know the crew, front of house, stage door, actors, cleaners, stage management, box office, marketing and management far better than any other time. I will miss that company feeling dreadfully.

We will of course, be back. Maybe bigger and better. Maybe clinging on for dear life! But theatre and its people are resilient. Professional or amateur, big or small, north, south, east or west, the theatre is in our blood. Until we can get back I, like many thousands of others - including all of you - will have to remain positive, hopeful and READY! Let's keep singing and supporting, watching and listening, interested and passionate... even if it's just popping into your local theatre for a coffee or buying some Christmas cards to support a theatrical charity, there are things we can do to stick together!

And spare a thought for this Ugly Sister, who although relieved he won't have to fake a Secret Santa smile on Boxing Day, will have to adjust to walking in flat shoes in December and doing the washing up! Hang on in there - you will find that this situation is "BEHIND YOU" and next year's panto season is something to look forward to... "Oh yes it is"!!!!

P.S. If you are looking for a Christmas present, I have two albums for sale! Available from my website www.benstock.biz They make excellent stocking fillers and failing that, even better coasters... forgive the plug... but I'm never one to miss an opportunity!!

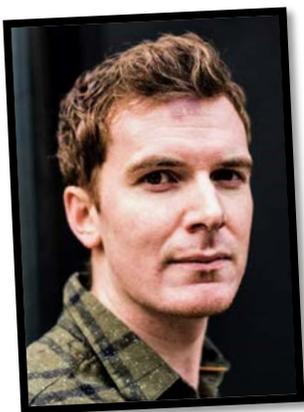
P.P.S. Since writing this article I am pleased to say that Ben has secured a role in the panto at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham – break a leg! Ed.



New Faces

Just before the first national lockdown hit us back in the Spring and scuppered our plans for *Kiss, Me Kate*, we held auditions for new members and were pleased to welcome the following new or returning members to BLOC:

Scott Allen



Scott has performed in pantomime and musicals throughout the UK and abroad and most recently was in *Crazy for You* with Bristol Musical Theatre at The Redgrave.

Jessica Bell



Jess was a child performer in BLOC's *Evita* before joining Minis Youth Theatre Club, then Bristol Musical Youth Productions, University of the West of England Centre of Performing Arts and she is currently a member of BAOS.

Jessica Errington



Jess is currently a member of Wells Little Theatre Company where she has played Hodel in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

David Evans



Also a member of Hens Teeth Productions, BAOS, BMC C, CADS and a former Vice Chairman of St Albans Players, David rejoins BLOC having last performed with us at the Hippodrome as the Toymaker in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Jaryd Evans



Another returning member, Jaryd performed with BLOC in *My Fair Lady* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and is also a member of BAOS and BMCC.

Emma Jones



Emma has performed locally with several companies including St Mary's Players for whom she was nominated for a Rose Bowl Award for her performance as The Baker's Wife in the show of the same name.

Jake Kuliszewski



Jake worked with Stage by Stage theatre company in Exeter and took a UAL performing arts course at Exeter College before moving to Bristol to study drama and acting at UWE Bristol.

Danielle Orlans

Danielle is a trained classical singer and Head of Drama at Gordano School; and before moving to Bristol she played Rizzo in *Grease* for the Centre Stage Company, London.

Charlie Rowlands

Charlie has performed with BAOS for three years and recently choreographed *Urinetown* which was nominated for a Rose Bowl Award (Best Musical); previously she was a member of BMYP (formerly Junior BLOC) for six years.

Laura Stanley

Laura re-joins BLOC having previously been in the *Fiddler on the Roof* ensemble then playing Mrs Pearce in *My Fair Lady* and Miss Phillips in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Natalie Tottle

A qualified advanced tap dancer, Natalie achieved a Distinction in Musical Theatre at Filton College and as a hobby was lead singer in a 14-piece weddings and function band.

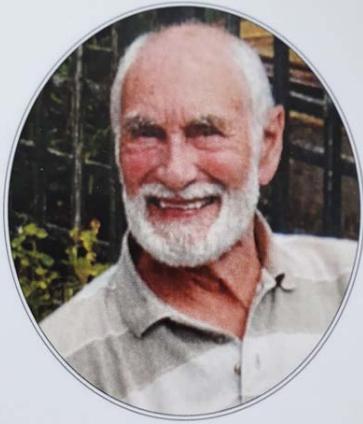
Maddie Walker

Maddie was nominated for the 'Best Actress in a Youth Production' Rose Bowl Award for playing Gabriella Montez in *High School Musical* and since moving up from youth productions she has performed as a principal dancer in *Singin' In The Rain* with BAOS.

Let's hope you become more than just new faces and that we can all get to know each other properly in 2021!

From the Wings

This is to be a regular column providing news of births, marriages and deaths within the BLOC family, and any other titbits of news we may come across. The following covers news in 2020 with apologies for any omissions. Our thanks to our Vice-President, Sue Donovan, for much of the information.



Denis Higgins

We were very sad to have to report the death of Denis Higgins earlier in the year. Born in Abertillery, Monmouthshire in 1930 he died at home in Stockwood, Bristol aged 90 on the 22nd of May. He was the widower of Adrienne Higgins. Adrienne was already a BLOC member when Denis (a.k.a. Dennis) joined BLOC in the 1970's and both were acting members for many years. They both were elected Life Members and looked after BLOC's archives. They both continued to support BLOC after standing down as acting members until Adrienne's death in January 2016. Both loved musicals and at his funeral the music played 'going in' was 'Something Wonderful' from The King & I as Adrienne played Lady Tiang in this show with BLOC at the Hippodrome; and the music played 'going out' was 'To Life' from Fiddler on the Roof, one of Denis' favourite musicals. Due to Covid restrictions only ten people could attend the funeral and Sue Donovan was delighted that the family asked her to attend.

On a happier note, in the last 12 months BLOC members have given birth to enough baby girls to cast Tevye's entire family the next time we do Fiddler on the Roof! Love and congratulations to them all 🥰🥰🥰🥰🥰

To **Sam and Tony Steadman** - Ophelia Bo was born on 12th Nov 2019 (a sister for Arabella)

To **Emma and Mike Griffiths** - Robyn Susan was born on the 29th February 2020

To **Sara and Jamie Anthony** - Jessica Helen was born on 14th May 2020 (a sister for Jack)

To **Lacie and Matt Bowen** - Eira Marian was born on the 19th June 2020

To **Grace and John Macdonald** - Jude Clara Bendle was born on the 21st September 2020 (a sister for Eda)



Finally, many congratulations to **Conner Vickery** on his engagement to Jodie Gibson.

**We wish you all a very Happy Christmas
and hope circumstances allow as much
family togetherness as possible.
May 2021 be a much better year for us all.**