

For the last decade, I have sent out this newsletter to you, our audience, telling you what is happening at our little theatre in Ashley Road. For the last 18 months, admittedly there has been little to report. But with Freedom Day in the rear view mirror and a glimmer of hope at a dramatic revival in our activities, welcome to the 20th anniversary edition of VFTW. There's news of lockdown activity behind the scenes, a triumph at Totton, pencilled in dates for a new season and Yorick finding a new home.

But we start with our youth theatre whose members have continued to meet once a week on Zoom or in person, forging links with other youth theatres via digital platforms and being invited to take part in a filmed community project organized by Salisbury Playhouse. Several of its members also took part in a Monologue Competition earlier this year, organized by Studio, which invited entry from all over the country and beyond (yes, indeed, we were able to boast entries from the USA and Europe!). However, it appears we are a pretty talented lot with members or a former member winning three of the five categories: Samantha Luckman (25 and over), Marie-Claire Wood (16-24) and Alice Walters (under 16). Among the judging panel of five were our former patron, author and playwright Barney Norris, and former Studio alumni, now professional actor, James Bradwell.



TOP AT TOTTON

We were winners too at this year's Totton Festival of Drama, bringing home the trophy we had won for **A Flock of Tigers** when the competition was last held in 2019. The festival postponed from its usual March slot to June to give groups the chance of in-person rehearsals, was held under strict Covid conditions but still managed to be as friendly and efficiently run as ever. Our production, **Afterplay** by Brian Friel, was named overall winner with director Lesley Bates scooping the Best Director shield, a Best Actress cup for Rachel Fletcher, and a

silver plate for Technical Achievement. George Goulding was just pipped for Best Actor and the adjudicator was equally taken by the set, Theo Ross's costumes and Sue Tranter's fine interpretation of Russian Peasant-behind-counter-cum-prompt. We hope to be able to share it with our Salisbury audiences at some point in the future, but have yet to have a slot confirmed at Studio.

SAFETY COMES FIRST

We are, of course, anxious to make our audiences feel as safe and secure as possible as we welcome you back into our theatre. Work is already in place to improve ventilation and other measures will be advised closer to our initial performances. We are mindful that the pandemic has not gone away and building audience confidence is at the top of our priority list. Our chairman Colin Hayman said: *"Of course, the most exciting and rewarding thing for us will be to get our audiences back and I take this opportunity to thank you all for the generous and continued support you give us in so many ways, and I sincerely hope you will feel happy and confident to return to Studio Theatre in the autumn."*

YORICK'S NEW HOME

Finally, our props department has a new resident. Studio supporter Wendy English had approached us earlier in the year with a mystery – she had lost the skull of the much-prized medical skeleton belonging to her late husband Dr English (that is going to read very badly, but I hope you know what I mean!) Had Studio borrowed said skull for Hamlet? Alas no, not our poor Yorick – that had come from elsewhere. Just recently, the skull came to light and Wendy wondered whether Studio would, in fact, like it. *"There is nowhere Yorick would prefer as his final resting place, than Studio Theatre!"* she told us, and so he will take pride of place in our props cupboard.

EXTENSION PROGRESS

Our set builders turned fixtures-and-fittings-men during this latest lockdown, kitting out our expanded workshop space with shelving, racking and high level storage areas so that flats, staircases, door frames and stage decking can all be safely stowed. The painting pixies are also back in business, with the new dressing rooms and old green room currently getting the magnolia and white gloss treatment and blue tiles being scrubbed for repurposing. As I write, costumes still occupy the rehearsal room upstairs, but with building, painting and shelving of the wardrobe space complete, order can be restored in neat racks of gowns, coats and Shakespearean finery in the coming months. Thanks to a grant from Wiltshire Council Salisbury Area Board, chestnut fencing now marks our perimeter at the rear of the theatre with mixed hedging planted to grow up against it. The fence on the boundary with the row of houses next door has also been replaced.



PHOENIX RISING

Our Director of Productions, Linda Hayman, is putting tentative dates in the diary for a re-opening in September.

All dates are subject to confirmation nearer the time, depending on any COVID restrictions in place, but if we cross all fingers and toes, autumn will look like this:

September 20-25: Arsenic and Old Lace. Theatre critic Mortimer is aghast to learn that his two elderly maiden aunts have a penchant for sending lonely old gents to a better place with the help of their homemade elderberry wine. To make matters worse, brother Teddy thinks he is Theodore Roosevelt and is building the Panama Canal in the basement and homicidal gangster brother Jonathan turns up looking for a safe place to hide from the cops. Anthony von Roretz directs Joseph Kesselring's classic black comedy.

December 3-4 and 6-11 plus a matinee: The Railway Children. Edith Nesbit's much-loved children's story comes to the stage in an acclaimed version by Mike Kenny. Colin Hayman takes control of the engine to steer a cast of adults and children through all the bits you remember most: the red petticoat, Perks' birthday, the old Gentleman waving from the carriage, and the magical ending - "Oh, my Daddy, my Daddy." This promises to be every bit as popular as Goodnight Mister Tom, so get your tickets early.

PLUS

There are plans to incorporate the postponed productions of **The Thrill of Love** and **A Fine Bright Day Today**, which were both in rehearsal when the lights went out, into the post-Christmas season. Details to follow at a later date.

But our first production in our re-opening theatre will be from our friends, **History at Large**, who will be performing a mock re-trial, written and directed by George Fleming, on August 27-28.

Time to replenish our depleted coffers, and our fund-raisers are already on the case.

Market Stall: The next market stall is arranged for Tuesday, September 28, the earliest date we could get: please make a note of the date.

Coffee Mornings @ the United Reformed Church: Four Saturday mornings in the diary so far – September 4, October 2, November 6 and December 4. So, if you fancy a refreshing cuppa and a slice of cake to break up the shopping, please drop by and join us.

*Next year will mark ten years since our 60th anniversary and the year a production of **Hamlet** from our little theatre went all the way to the stage at Stratford. We now look forward to our platinum anniversary next year and a return to better times.*