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ISSUE 414 AUTUMN 2020

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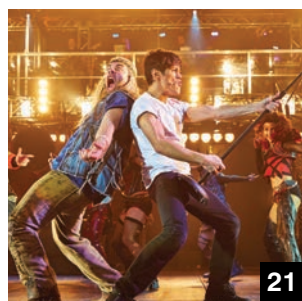
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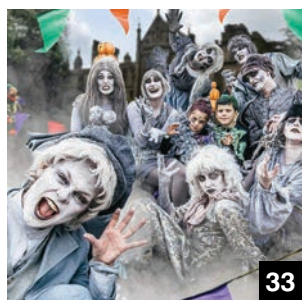
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What's On

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Local artists chosen for new micro commissions

Ten artists from Coventry & Warwickshire have been selected to receive grant funding to take their ideas and skills to the next level.

The Coventry City of Culture Trust worked on the initiative with Unlimited - a national arts commissioning programme that enables new work by disabled artists to reach UK and international audiences. The organisations put out a joint call for d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, living or regularly working within a CV postcode, to apply for 10 micro commissions of up to £1,000 each.

The work produced by the 10 selected artists covers themes of activism, community collaboration, the environment and public & digital spaces.

Acting like Grown Ups at the Coventry Belgrade

The award-winning Mischief Theatre make a welcome return to the Midlands next year to present a brand-new comedy. Showing at the Coventry Belgrade from 26 April to 1 May, *Grown Ups* follows a group of unruly six-year-olds on their journey through anarchic high school teenage years to the challenges of adulthood. Mischief Theatre have previously enjoyed major critical successes with *The Play That Goes Wrong*, *The Comedy About A Bank Robbery* and *Peter Pan Goes Wrong*. For more information about *Grown Ups* and to book tickets, visit belgrade.co.uk

Spirit of 2012 benefits Midlands arts projects

A share of £600,000 has been awarded to three West Midlands organisations to create inclusive arts & cultural projects linked to the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022. The award has come about as a result of a collaboration between the London Olympic & Paralympic Games legacy funder - Spirit Of 2012 - and Birmingham 2022. The successful projects - Creative Black Country, Caudwell Children and Playing Out In Canley, Coventry - have each been awarded £200,000. Collectively they will work with more than 1,600 disabled and non-

disabled people 'to explore links between communities and Birmingham 2022, maximise the impact of the Commonwealth Games and leave a lasting social legacy'.

Snowman returns to the cathedral for Christmas

Coventry Cathedral will host a screening of *The Snowman* on Saturday 19 December - with the famous animated film being accompanied by a live orchestra. Presented by Carrot Productions, the show is touring for the eighth year and will include a performance of the film's much-loved song, *Walking In The Air*, by a local young soloist. A Christmas medley, a 'fun introduction to the orchestra' and a visit from *The Snowman* himself will also feature. For more information about the show, visit coventrycathedral.org.uk

Rosie Kay premiere set for the Birmingham Rep

Award-winning Birmingham-based choreographer Rosie Kay is returning to the stage at Birmingham Repertory Theatre this autumn to perform the premiere of her new solo work, *Absolute Solo II*, as part of a triple bill. Twenty-one years on from her first ever solo show - *Absolute Solo* - and five years after last appearing on stage herself, Rosie returns with works that look backwards and

forwards at her personal experience as a woman in the dance industry. "It's very exciting to be preparing to go back onto the stage again, after five years of 'retirement'," says Rosie. "I feel very different as a dancer but incredibly at home performing again, and I can't wait for the thrill of being with a live audience." Rosie Kay's *Absolute Solo II* shows at Birmingham Repertory Theatre on Saturday 21 November at 8pm. Tickets are now on sale. Book online at birmingham-rep.co.uk

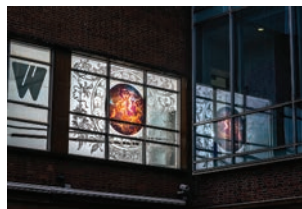
Talking Heads in Malvern

Malvern Theatres Young Company make a welcome return to the stage in October with a production of two of Alan Bennett's famous *Talking Heads* plays. *A Chip In The Sugar* sees the life of devoted son Graham Whittaker begin to unravel when he discovers his ageing mother has taken up with an old flame... Her *Big Chance*, meanwhile, focuses on aspiring actress Lesley, who, after a series of unpromising extra roles on television programmes, finds what she thinks is her big break as the adventurous Travis in a new film for the West German market. Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* shows at Malvern Theatres from 13 to 17 October. Seats are limited due to social distancing, and tickets can be bought online at malvern-theatres.co.uk

Socially distanced art show responds to Covid lockdown

A socially distanced art exhibition inspired by the public's response to lockdown has gone on show at Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery.

Work On Windows: The Herbert In A New Perspective is an exhibition produced in response to the artwork created and displayed in the windows of thousands of homes during the recent Covid-19 lockdown. Each commission is directly painted, drawn or stuck onto the external windows which overlook the Herbert terrace on Jordan Well. The exhibition is viewable without having to enter the building.



Hatton Shopping Village vintage fun

Hatton Shopping Village is hosting a vintage-themed weekend on Saturday 3 & Sunday 4 October, providing visitors with the chance to step back in time and enjoy displays from the 1940s & '50s... For more information, visit hattonworld.com



'Horrible' drive-in Christmas show heading for the region

A drive-in Christmas show from the Horrible Histories team, Birmingham Stage Company and Car Park Party - an ensemble which presented the summer's only national tour of comedy, theatre and live music shows - is heading for the Midlands.

Car Park Panto's Horrible Christmas will see

historical characters including Charles Dickens, Oliver Cromwell, King Henry VIII and St Nicholas join forces to save the festive season from 'a jolly man dressed in red'.

Dates and venues for the show are yet to be confirmed, but you can visit carparkparty.com to find out more.

Work starts on new £2.4million creative hub in Coventry

Work has begun on converting a historic industrial site in Coventry into a new £2.4million creative hub for artists. With the aim of having the premises ready in time for UK City of Culture 2021, construction work has started

on the Daimler Powerhouse, once home to the world-famous car factory on the edge of the city centre in Radford.

The hub will be Coventry's first-ever purpose-built and collaborative art production facility.





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The Living Orchestra New Beginnings

OOTs returns as the Living Orchestra following an absence of six months with a concert of celebration and thanksgiving.

Tuesday 6 October 2020 6pm and 8.30pm

Doubles

Duets are explored in this concert through the double concertos of J.S. Bach and Astor Piazzolla featuring Craig Ogden and Miloš Milivojević.

Tuesday 17 November 2020 6pm and 8.30pm

Company

An adventure of musical delights with the fascinating Joseph Bologne, the minimalist Michael Nyman, the influential Philip Glass and finishing with the greatest composer of all time: Mozart.

Tuesday 1 December 2020 6pm and 8.30pm

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Black Futures at the Coventry Belgrade Theatre

Coventry's Belgrade Theatre is this autumn hosting a new festival celebrating Black creativity, invention, collaboration and entrepreneurship in the West Midlands. Taking place from 1 to 31 October both online and in-person, Black Futures invites artists, businesses and cultural leaders to take over the theatre building and pioneer new ways of sharing creative work in the lead-up to Coventry's City of Culture year in 2021. The festival features visual art, photography, poetry, discussions, performances and a number of creative demonstrations, ranging from natural hair workshops to the live creation of an art installation.

Keane to perform at Forest Live '21

Keane will next summer perform in Cannock Chase Forest as part of Forest Live, the annual concert series presented by Forestry England. The band last appeared as part of Forest Live in 2010. The aim of the concert series is to introduce forests to new audiences by inviting people to enjoy live music in a number of natural woodland arenas around the country. Over 1.9 million people have attended a Forest Live gig in the last 20 years. Keane will play Cannock Chase Forest on Saturday 12 June. Tickets are now on sale at forestryengland.uk/music

John Bishop to tour to the region

Comedian John Bishop will tour to the Midlands late next year. John's eighth stand-up show, Right Here, Right Now, will stop off at: Dudley Town Hall, 5 October 2021; Symphony Hall, Birmingham, 21 January 2022; and Utilita Arena Birmingham, 1 & 2 April 2022. Tickets are on sale now at johnbishoponline.com

Artist highlights threat to orangutans

Environmentalist and artist Louis Masai has partnered with Meridian - the palm-oil-free nut butter brand - to warn about the very real prospect of orangutans becoming extinct. Louis recently visited Birmingham as part of his latest initiative, #ProtectPongo ('Pongo' is Latin for orangutan). While in the city, the artist created striking portraits of orangutans interacting with the threats they face, from deforestation to palm oil production and potentially even Covid-19.

Commenting, Louis said: "I have become fixated with the discussion of animal conservation. It's difficult to make people stop, think and change habits which impact a species on the other side of the world. But #ProtectPongo is designed to challenge people to consider a world without orangutans in it."



Success for THSH digital broadcasts

Birmingham Town Hall and Symphony Hall's (THSH) digital broadcasts during the Covid-19 crisis will continue during the autumn, with a number of pre-recorded concerts being made available to view online.

The broadcasts began in April during lockdown and have so far amassed over a quarter of a million views.

Commenting on the initiative, Nick Reed, chief executive for the music charity responsible for THSH, said: "Throughout this global pandemic, many registered charities are relying on the generosity of their supporters more than ever. The digital performances and activities we have continued - and will continue to deliver - in these desperate times have been made possible with the support of Town Hall and Symphony Hall's audiences."

To find out more about the digital broadcasts and how to offer support to THSH, visit thsh.co.uk

Peach Perfect gift ideas for Christmas

A Warwickshire entrepreneur is urging people to buy 'fun, quirky and imaginative' gifts this Christmas.

Kate Findlay, the founder of Barford-based online gift boutique Peach Perfect, said: "We certainly need to cheer ourselves up this Christmas! And even if we can't see some of our family and friends, we can still send lovely little tokens as virtual hugs, to show we're thinking of them."

Kate is predicting that Christmas gifts this year will be inspired by 'home, garden and entertainment'. You can check out Peach Perfect's range at: peachperfect.co.uk





ROLL UP! ROLL UP!

DR BLOOD'S TRAVELLING SHOW
IS COMING TO TOWN...

Modern tech meets morality play in a deliciously dark outdoor show, arriving in Coventry just in time for Halloween...

Trick or treating might be off the cards this autumn, but that needn't mean that Halloween is cancelled. This October, the Belgrade Theatre is offering you the chance to get your fright fix with an innovative outdoor production from imitating the dog and Leeds Playhouse.

Drawing on a mix of classic horror movies, travelling carnival and medicine shows and medieval morality plays, Dr Blood's Old Travelling Show will be the first piece of live theatre hosted by the Belgrade since venues went into lockdown back in March.

"We've just been taking everything as it comes, really," explains imitating the dog's Co-Artistic Director, Andrew Quick, in talking about the process of creating new work in extraordinary times. "We always knew that having to deal with changing guidelines would make this a bit of a risk, but if we had a chance of being able to create theatre that audiences can enjoy in a Covid-safe way, we felt like it was one we had to take."

"In rehearsals we're all wearing masks, sometimes visors too, and everyone has to be six feet apart at all times. We can't really socialise between rehearsals, so it's a huge change for us, but we're absorbing and accommodating the restrictions into the piece itself."

"It's been a challenge, but in some ways, I think having to think outside the box has actually resulted in us making some changes for the better. As a company, we're pretty good at being pragmatic and adapting to different conditions in that way."

It's true that imitating the dog have an impressive track record for theatrical innovation, typically fusing live performance with cutting-edge digital technology. It's this appetite for invention that has helped them to continue working throughout lockdown, producing three 'live graphic novels' as part of the BBC's Culture In Quarantine programme, as well as working with the University of Utrecht on an online game incorporating film and performance. Dr

Blood's Old Travelling Show follows in a similar vein, combining some of the very oldest forms of theatre with something much more up-to-date.

"In a lot of ways, this show was developed in direct response to the situation, but even before lockdown, we had wanted to develop a more widely tourable show that was less reliant on middle-scale venues. Originally we'd had the idea of doing something where the whole show could fit inside a car, but obviously at the moment you couldn't do that because you wouldn't be able to get enough people into a car in a Covid-safe way."

“The premise is that we have a group of travellers who show up and tell a story which exposes the corruption in whatever town they find themselves in”

"So we started thinking about something that was more like an outdoor version of what we normally do, which is to create these very technologically complex pieces. Without giving too much away, it all starts when this battered old Luton van shows up, and out of that van emerges a sort of stage with screens."

"We have two projectors in front of the screens, and a rear projector in the back of the van, so we create this quite magical, technological world, using actors and puppets and figurines to unfurl the narrative. It's kind of like a cross between a Punch &

Judy show, a vampire grand guignol and classic street theatre, updated for the 21st century."

While this might be 'theatre for our times', it stops short of explicitly referencing the events of this year. Instead, the show will ground itself in reality using local references specific to each venue.

"The premise is that we have a group of travellers who show up and tell a story which exposes the corruption in whatever town they find themselves in. We have three authority figures - the mayor, the chief constable and the headteacher - and they are the local town officials. Then we have Dr Blood and two other strangers with supernatural powers who are seeking retribution for the evil deeds the officials have committed. In that sense it's really drawing on the medieval morality play tradition, where travelling players would turn up with all their props and costumes and pieces of set bundled into a cart."

Dr Blood's Old Travelling Show is imitating the dog's second recent co-production with Leeds Playhouse, following the acclaimed *Night Of The Living Dead REMIX* - a reimagining of George A Romero's 1968 zombie movie.

"I suppose we are horror fans, now I think about it! We've always been interested in science-fiction, time travel, the supernatural and the gothic. I think a lot of our connection to culture is through mainstream cinema, which often deals with those things. We also have a relationship to similar forms of popular literature - crime thrillers, vampire stories, that kind of thing. So it's definitely in our mix, although I'd like to think we'll get away from it at some point!"

Dr Blood's Old Travelling Show stops off at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, on Friday 23 & Saturday 24 October. For further information and tickets, visit belgrade.co.uk



Orchestra Of The Swan return with live concerts at three Warwickshire venues

Armscote Manor, Sat 3 October; Stratford Playhouse, Tues 6 October; Number 8, Pershore, Thurs 5 November; Stratford Playhouse, Tues 17 November & Tues 1 December

As well as being much admired for their performances of works by legendary composers, the Stratford-based Orchestra of the Swan are also held in high regard for their championing of new music, having presented more than 70 world premieres.

This autumn sees them making a welcome return after the Covid-19 lockdown, presenting performances at three Warwickshire venues. Their opening concert at Armscote Manor - Equinox: A Celebration Of The Seasons - has already sold out at the time of going to print. It's followed three days later by The Living Orchestra: New Beginnings. The 'concert of celebration and thanksgiving' is the first of three

performances by the orchestra at Stratford Playhouse.

The second is Doubles - an exploration of duets through the double concertos of JS Bach and Astor Piazzolla.

The final Playhouse concert, Company, is described by the orchestra as 'an adventure of musical delights, with the fascinating Joseph Bologne, the minimalist Michael Nyman, the influential Philip Glass and finishing with the greatest composer of all time: Mozart'.

The orchestra also visit Pershore in early November, to present Petite Symphonie - 'two elegant, delicate and sweet little works in one evening'.

Leamington Music makes its Dream Factory debut

The Dream Factory, Warwick, Tues 13 October

Leamington Music debuts at The Dream Factory in Warwick this autumn, presenting a series of concerts featuring a wide range of music... Although the Fitzwilliam String Quartet season opener is sold out, there's plenty more to enjoy in the forthcoming weeks, with Joglaresa going medieval in Boogie Knights, Kosmos hitting the Balkans and Mediterranean, and the Mellstock Band moving to Hardy's time with The Shepherd's Calendar.



Armonico Consort perform Vivaldi's The Four Seasons

Royal Pump Rooms, Leamington Spa, Thurs 29 October; Malvern Theatres, Worcestershire, Sat 31 October

Founded by organist and conductor Christopher Monks in 2001, Armonico are one of the largest organisations of their kind in the UK. Using authentic period instruments, the baroque consort regularly perform with some of the best solo musicians in the world.

These latest concerts see them getting their teeth into The Four Seasons, one of classical music's most famous works. Comprising four separate violin concertos based around poems about spring, summer, autumn and winter, Vivaldi's vibrant and virtuosic composition is widely considered to be one of the most exciting pieces of music to see and hear live.



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Grande Exhibitions' Van Gogh Alive is a truly unique encounter with art where "you don't just look at his paintings, you step inside them and feel their power". Visitors can experience the Dutch artist's evolution - from under-appreciated painter into celebrated genius - via the projections at their fingertips, above their heads and beneath their feet.

Families and art lovers alike get to wander through an immersive gallery of over 3,000 images of Van Gogh's legendary works,

including *The Starry Night*, *Sunflowers* and *Wheatfield With Crows*. In the process, they come face-to-face with the vibrant colours and vivid detail that encapsulates his unique Post-Impressionist style.

Presented across the globe to great critical acclaim, Van Gogh Alive has been exhibited in a wide variety of locations - from a deconsecrated church in Florence, to the lake parks of Shanghai and the spectacular Louvre Abu Dhabi. The show is both a

biography and an expansive anthology of masterpieces, specially tailored for each space it visits. Artworks are displayed in all their glory, broken down to showcase certain sections, or even magnified on a breathtaking scale. Photographs, videos and deeply philosophical quotes from Van Gogh himself have been entwined with images of his works to call attention to snippets of his real-life inspiration.





Paintings are shown in such detail (thanks to state-of-the-art technology) that observers will be given fresh insight into the carnival of colours and precise techniques used by the artist. This ethereal experience of feeling fully submerged in Van Gogh's canvas is interwoven with waves of carefully chosen classical symphonies and bursts of fragrance to pique all the senses.

In addition to the main exhibition, Van Gogh Alive also features hands-on art stations, interpretative areas, a life-sized recreation of Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles, and a captivating mirrored room adorned with hundreds of sunflowers - perhaps Van Gogh's greatest muse.

Bruce Peterson, owner of Grande Exhibitions, says: "We're incredibly excited that Van Gogh Alive is set to make its UK debut in Birmingham. The global exhibition is a perfect Covid-aware experience for the whole family that will provide some escapism and education. We find that adults and children enjoy the experience in different ways, finding their own meaning in Van Gogh's work as they explore the galleries.

"We visited a number of venues in the UK, but as soon as we entered Birmingham Hippodrome, we knew we had to bring our Van Gogh Alive here. It's a unique, iconic

venue, and we truly believe once we tailor the experience to come alive in the Hippodrome, visitors won't believe their eyes at the size, scale and beauty within.

Van Gogh Alive is where technology and music meet forward-thinking art curation, boasting the title of most visited multi-sensory experience in the world

"Since announcing the opening in Sydney and reopening in Mexico City with Covid-safe measures in place, demand for tickets has been even higher than pre-lockdown. We're confident that the experience will be extremely popular in Birmingham, and we

can't wait to open the doors to our first ever UK showing!"

The exhibition marks the first time Birmingham Hippodrome has invited the public into the building since the closure of all theatres and other public spaces back in March. Birmingham has a long history of championing arts and culture, and Van Gogh Alive is an opportunity to continue to support one of the UK's most stimulating and essential industries.

Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, agrees: "Many sectors are going through an incredibly difficult period due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the arts is no exception. Birmingham Hippodrome has had its challenges, but it's a critical venue for the West Midlands, and it's great to see how it's adapting and thinking outside the box to overcome these challenges.

"The arrival of Grande Exhibitions and Van Gogh Alive is not only a boost for the Hippodrome, but it will also be great for the wider West Midlands economy, helping to draw visitors back to our region."

Van Gogh Alive shows at Birmingham Hippodrome from Thursday 8 October to Thursday 31 December.

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Purchasing a seat sponsorship is easy, visit grandtheatre.co.uk or call the **Box Office on 01902 42 92 12** for more details.

*Normal price £250

19 must see musicals coming to the Midlands...



Hairspray

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 20 - Sat 24 April

It's 1962, and in Tracy Turnblad's Baltimore hometown, massive hairdos, dancing the twist and Corny Collins' daytime dance show are the hottest tickets in teen culture.

In some ways, life for the starry-eyed Tracy is as big, bright and breezy

as a bubblegum balloon - but there's trouble brewing just beneath the surface...

This Tony Award-winning hit of a show returns to the Midlands with a jukebox-worth of 1960s-style dance music and 'downtown' rhythm & blues. Hit songs include Welcome To The 60s, You Can't Stop The Beat and The Nicest Kids In Town.

Six The Musical

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Tues 20 - Sun 25 April (tickets on sale, 1 December)
Birmingham Hippodrome, Tues 14 - Sat 18 September

SIX's runaway success has shown no signs of abating since it premiered as a student production at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2017. From Tudor queens to battling boss-women, the show features the wives of Henry VIII taking to the stage to tell their own versions of their lives.

This high-energy celebration of girl power sees the cast backed by all-female band The Ladies In Waiting.



Ghost The Musical

Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury,
Tues 6 - Sat 10 July



This ever-popular stage version of the award-winning 1990 movie starring Patrick Swayzee, Demi Moore and Whoopi Goldberg makes a welcome return to the Midlands. For those not in the know, the production tells the story of a ghost named Sam. Caught between this world and the next, he desperately attempts to communicate with his girlfriend, Molly, to warn her that she's in mortal danger from his murderer. A timeless tale about the power of love that beautifully blends the genres of romance and comedy, Ghost features The Righteous Brothers' Unchained Melody and numerous songs co-written by Eurythmics' Dave Stewart.

Rock Of Ages

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Tues 6 - Sat 10 July; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Tues 2 - Sat 6 November

Cinema-goers who caught the 2012 movie version of Rock Of Ages, starring Tom Cruise, Alec Baldwin, Russell Brand and Catherine Zeta-Jones, will know exactly what to expect from this feelgood musical. For those who didn't and therefore don't, it focuses on the romance between a small-town girl and a big-city rocker, and is packed to its proverbial rafters with classic 1980s numbers. So if you're someone for whom the decade of Glasnost, yuppies, Miami Vice and mullet hair-dos took place against a soundtrack of pounding rock anthems, this is the show for you. Songs include We Built This City, Here I Go Again, I Want To Know What Love Is and The Final Countdown.





Nritya Black Country

Sat 19 Sep – Sun 20 Dec 2020

Nritya: Collecting The Story Of Indian Dance In The Black Country 1960-2000 shares stories, photos, film and objects collected from some of the pioneer dancers, teachers, choreographers and members of the local community. This exhibition is a collaboration between Jaivant Patel Dance & Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

Nritya Black Country is supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Free Admission

#NrityaBC

www.NrityaBlackCountry.com

19 must see musicals coming to the Midlands...



Waitress

Birmingham Hippodrome, Tues 11 - Sat 15 May; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 23 - Sat 28 August; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 29 November - Sat 4 December

Smash-hit Broadway and West End musical Waitress makes three Midlands stop-offs next year as part of its first ever UK tour.

Based on the 2007 movie, Waitress tells the story of Jenna, an expert pie maker in a small town who dreams of a way out of her loveless marriage. A baking contest in a nearby county and the town's new doctor may provide her with the chance of a new life, while her fellow waitresses offer their own recipes for happiness...

The show is being brought to life by a groundbreaking female-led creative team.

Mamma Mia!

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 2 - Sat 13 March; Birmingham Hippodrome, Tues 3 - Sat 14 May, 2022



This legendary show is of course a nicely contrived vehicle for the chart-topping music of 1970s super troupers Abba. The Swedish Fab Four scored mega-hit after mega-hit with catchy numbers including Waterloo, Dancing Queen, The Name Of The Game, The Winner Takes It All and Take A Chance On Me, all of which are present and correct in this blockbuster offering.

9 To 5 The Musical

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Mon 25 - Fri 29 May; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 1 - Fri 5 June; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 3 - Fri 7 August;

"I'm so excited that 9 To 5 is heading to the Midlands," says Dolly Parton, in talking about her hit musical's three visits to the region in 2021.

"I'm hoping you have as much fun watching it as I had writing the music for it."



The show is perfect for anyone who's ever wanted to string up their boss, which is almost all of us. So come join the fun!" As with the original 1980s movie and spin-off TV series, the stage production of 9 To 5 centres around the story of three office workers, who team up to turn the tables on their sexist and egotistical bigot of a boss. Expect to be dancing in the aisles...

School Of Rock

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Sat 13 - Sat 27 February; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 20 - Sat 25 September; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 26 - Sat 31 July



There's a school of thought that School Of Rock would've been even better without Jack Black. And the great thing about Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage version of the hit 2003 movie is that you actually get to find out if that's true!

Alongside its lack of Black, the show has plenty else to recommend it, including no fewer than 14 new songs from Lord Lloyd Webber. All the original numbers from the movie also feature.

For those not in the know, School Of Rock

tells the story of wannabe rock star Dewey Finn. Posing as a substitute teacher at an elite prep school, Dewey not only introduces the students to 'his kind of music' but also helps the uptight headmistress to rediscover her inner wild child...

Chicago The Musical

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Fri 12 - Sat 20 March; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 28 June - Sat 3 July; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 25 - Sat 30 October

Chicago's debauched glamour, jazz-tinged score and smouldering dance numbers give it a touch of real old-Broadway style decadence.

An astonishingly accurate satire on the shallow, media-obsessed world of the 21st century, it's almost impossible to believe it was first conceived over 40 years ago.

It also has the considerable lure of choreography by Broadway legend Bob Fosse - and he's the reason the show was re-conceived in 1996.

Set in the Chicago of the Roaring 20s, the action takes place in a jailhouse, as two ambitious and sexy 'cons battle it out to be the most notorious murderer...



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Everybody's Talking About Jamie

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, date tbc;
The Alexandra, Birmingham, Mon 26 April -
Sat 1 May

Everybody's Talking About Jamie may have come from humble beginnings - it was inspired by a television documentary and premiered in Sheffield - but after only a matter of months it had transferred to the West End. Since then, the hit musical has enjoyed blockbusting success, with five Olivier Award nominations, an extensive UK tour and a forthcoming feature-film version testifying to its incredible popularity. The show, which follows Jamie New's quest for acceptance on his journey to becoming a drag queen, co-stars soap favourites Shane Richie and Shobna Gulati. Layton Williams takes the title role. "This musical tries to tell people to stay true to who they are and to be proud of themselves," says Layton, "and that if they're different, or feel like they don't fit in, then there's a place for them in the world anyway. It's all about having hope."

Footloose

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 15 - Sat 20 March; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 6 - Sat 10 April; Malvern Theatres, Mon 17 - Sat 22 May; The Alexandra, Birmingham, Mon 2 - Sat 7 August



Featuring classic numbers such as Holding Out For A Hero, Almost Paradise, Let's Hear It For The Boy, and of course the title track itself, hit Broadway and West End musical Footloose tells the story of city boy Ren's arrival in Bomont - and of the impact which his dancing has on a town held back by the memory of a tragedy.

Something Rotten

The REP, Birmingham,
Thurs 7 - Sat 30 October

When the 16th century Bottom brothers - aspiring playwrights living in the shadow of William Shakespeare - find out from a

soothsayer that the future of theatre will see acting being combined with singing and dancing, they set about the task of writing the world's first ever musical...

Sean Foley has had a far from ideal first few months in his new role as artistic director of the Birmingham Rep, so he'll be crossing his fingers, along with the rest of theatreland, that 2021 will bring with it a return to normality. Assuming it does, Sean will no doubt relish getting his teeth into this hit musical comedy, an offering described by New York Magazine as "The Producers meets Spamalatot meets The Book Of Mormon... squared."

Menopause The Musical 2

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Thurs 25 February; Bedworth Civic Hall, Sat 27 February; Malvern Theatres, Fri 9 April; Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Wed 21 April; The Alexandra, Birmingham, Sun 13 June

Female TV stars 'of a certain age' are much in evidence in this well-reviewed show, although the identities of those taking part on this particular occasion are yet to be revealed.

When four menopausal women meet in a department store, conversation quickly turns to the one thing they all have in common - the menopause. Cue innumerable one-liners

on subjects including forgetfulness, mood swings, wrinkles, night sweats and uncontrollable chocolate binges...

The Addams Family

The Alexandra, Birmingham,
Tues 13 - Sat 17 April

Samantha Womack and Cameron Blakely break out the gruesome makeup and theatrical cobwebs to star in this brand new production of the hit musical, based on the popular mid-1960s US TV series of the same name. So if you fancy a lightheartedly spintingling evening spent watching Uncle Fester howl at the moon, while Gomez and Morticia fight for supremacy and the ancestors create pandemonium, the gloomy old mansion at 0001 Cemetery Lane is the address to head for...





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19 must see musicals coming to the Midlands...



We Will Rock You

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 8 - Sat 13 February; Birmingham Hippodrome, Mon 17 - Sat 29 May

A pulsating Ben Elton-written homage to the music of Queen, *We Will Rock You* may be short on storyline, but it's got bags of energy - and just about as brilliant a soundtrack as any musical's ever likely to boast.

The show's frontline performers give it their all to excellent effect, while the sets and choreography ensure a visual spectacle to remember. For those who care about the wafer-thin plot, the story is set in a future where originality has been quashed, musical instruments banned, and a hero is needed to bring back rock music...

Yes, it's all a bit contrived, but how else are you going to glue together all of Queen's greatest hits in a single show?

A fantastic evening's entertainment for fans of Freddie & Co, so catch it when you can...

Grease

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 3 - Sat 8 May; The Alexandra, Birmingham, Tues 13 - Sat 17 July

Dust off your leather jackets, pull on your bobby-socks and get ready for the most fun-filled high-octane rock'n'roll party of them all!

Grease is the original high-school musical, featuring all the unforgettable songs from the hit movie, including *You're The One That I Want*, *Grease Is The Word*, *Summer Nights*, *Hopelessly Devoted To You*, *Sandy and Greased Lightnin'*.



The Magician's Elephant

Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, Wed 14 October - Sat 1 January 2022

The Royal Shakespeare Company's Christmas offering this year would have been a new musical adaptation of *The Magician's Elephant*.

Sadly, the Covid crisis means that families will have to wait until next autumn to enjoy the stage version of bestselling author Kate DiCamillo's critically acclaimed novel.

The Magician's Elephant tells the story of orphan Peter Augustus Duchenne, who lives a frugal life in the lonely town of Baltese.

Then, one day, a magician conjures an elephant from the sky...

The animal's appearance sets off a chain of remarkable events that changes Baltese forever.

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

Stafford Gatehouse, Fri 4 June; Lichfield Garrick, Sat 5 June; Malvern Theatres, 9 June; Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa, Sun 20 June; Sutton Coldfield Town Hall, Wed 14 July; Brierley Hill Civic, Thurs 15 July; Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury, Sat 17 July; The Place, Telford, Thurs 9 September; Swan Theatre, Worcester, Sun 12 September; The Albany Theatre, Coventry, Thurs 16 September; Palace Theatre, Redditch, Wed 22 September; William Aston Hall, Wrexham, Sat 6 November

Linda Nolan and X-Factor finalist Niki Evans are two of the four women enjoying an evening of fun and frivolity in this brand new musical comedy.

Described as a no-holds-barred romp through everything life throws at a modern-day woman, the show is unlikely to pull up any trees when it comes to originality. That said, having previously helmed *Hormonal Housewives*, its producers absolutely know the market they're playing to, and are old

hands at giving their audience a fantastic night out.

So if you fancy channelling your inner diva for a couple of hours, you know what you need to do...

Dreamgirls

Venues and dates to be confirmed soon...

Take a rollercoaster ride back to the 1960s with this smash-hit musical inspired by the story of Diana Ross & The Supremes.

Dreamgirls debuted on Broadway 39 years ago but is best known from the 2006 film version starring Jamie Foxx and Beyoncé Knowles. A story of friendship, ambition, and how the former can sometimes be compromised by the latter, the show follows the fortunes of Effie, Lorrell and Deena - three talented young singers in the turbulent '60s who, managed by a former Cadillac salesman, aim to hit the high notes as girl group the Dreamettes. Featured numbers include *And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going*, *Listen, I Am Changing* and *One Night Only*.





CREATING A LEGACY

**BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET
CELEBRATES 30 YEARS**



In 1990, Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet migrated to the Midlands to become Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB). In the 30 years since, the company has premiered a staggering 58 brand-new ballets in the heart of the second city.

It has also got through 75,000 pairs of pointe shoes (at a rate of 2,500 pairs a year) and emptied 3,000 cans of hairspray in the wigs department!

One of the company's premieres, presented in its first year in Birmingham, was the now-internationally acclaimed production of *The Nutcracker*. BRB's then-director, Sir Peter Wright, set himself the mammoth task of creating a new version of Tchaikovsky's classic. It opened 98 years after the very first performance of the ballet.

BRB's *The Nutcracker* was dedicated to the City of Birmingham as a token of appreciation for its support of the company. Since it debuted, there have been 619 performances of the production, 598 of which have taken place at BRB's Birmingham Hippodrome home. It remains a beacon of artistic excellence on a global scale, making a welcome return each Christmas.

Another Birmingham Royal Ballet classic making a return - in February 2021 - is *Cinderella*. Sir David Bintley's enchanting fairytale ballet, set to Sergei Prokofiev's sumptuous score, premiered at the Hippodrome 10 years ago and featured as the BBC Christmas ballet.

Both *Cinderella* and *The Nutcracker* boast the renowned and utterly spellbinding designs of John Macfarlane. Legendary productions in BRB's repertoire, the ballets dazzle visually, technically and emotionally, steeping Birmingham Hippodrome in glittering extravagance and generating an electric atmosphere.

Running alongside its performance schedule, BRB is heavily involved with the local

community via its Dance Track initiative. Dance Track was created 21 years ago to take ballets into schools, present dance to children who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to enjoy it, and scout for talent. Today, Birmingham Royal Ballet visits one-quarter of all the city's primary schools and runs workshops for 2,500 youngsters each year.

BRB's Freefall Dance company, meanwhile, is made up of performers with severe learning difficulties, and is just one example of the company championing inclusivity in the arts.

Continuing Birmingham Royal Ballet's distinguished legacy is its recently appointed director, Carlos Acosta. Taking over from the retiring Sir David Bintley last January, Cuban-born Carlos is one of the world's most iconic principal dancers. He also heads up his own contemporary dance company, Acosta Danza.

With Covid-19 meaning that many of BRB's plans have failed to come to fruition this year, the company is more determined than ever to deliver something special to the city of Birmingham in these uncertain times. This autumn, an innovative digital projection and augmented reality piece is being presented at Birmingham Repertory Theatre. *Lazuli Sky* will be the first one-act ballet to be commissioned and presented under Carlos Acosta, and utilises social distancing within the performance.

A hopeful piece by Birmingham-born choreographer Will Tuckett, *Lazuli Sky* explores the vast openness of the sky as a direct response to lockdown. It takes its inspiration from the deep, speckled blue of the treasured Lapis Lazuli gemstone - the pigment from which was the most expensive used in Renaissance oil paintings, including those of Leonardo Da Vinci. The unique production is set to Shaker Loops by John Adams and includes the work of designer Samuel Wyer and projection designer Nina Dunn.

A second brand-new offering from BRB takes 'honouring Birmingham' to the next level. *City Of A Thousand Trades* is a new one-act ballet celebrating and inspired by the rich and diverse heritage of the second city.

Birmingham became known as the City of a Thousand Trades as Britain's Industrial Revolution reached its peak. The city ballooned into the second largest in the UK, thanks to its central location and vast water network, which was essential for booming business. Skilled tradespeople migrated to the city from throughout the Commonwealth, including Ireland, India and the West Indies, to create the melting pot of cultures for which modern-day Birmingham is known and admired.

Commissioned as part of BRB's Ballet Now programme, which seeks to find exciting, diverse, international and creative talent, *City Of A Thousand Trades* will be brought to the Birmingham Rep's stage in May 2021 by choreographer Miguel Altunaga.

Commenting on the ballet, Carlos Acosta said: "As soon as I came here, I wanted to create a statement about Birmingham with a ballet about the history of the people of Birmingham. This is a large city and a city of immigrants who share the story of Birmingham, and I'm very interested that the work explores that."

"I also think we have a responsibility to break the stigma that ballet is elitist, white, and 'of yesterday'. I'm interested in the idea of giving a voice which is representative of the time we are living in, so that ballet is not about the past but also the present and into the future."

For more information on future Birmingham Royal Ballet performances, visit brb.org.uk

DID YOU KNOW?

75,000 pairs of pointe shoes have been used over the course of 30 years, at a rate of 2,500 pairs a year.

10,000 costumes are stored by BRB, mainly in a warehouse in Dudley.

3,000 cans of hairspray have been used by the wigs department since 1990.

1,397 pairs of pointe shoes have been used just for the role of Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* since 1990. A principal dancer in that role tends to go through two pairs a show.

1,000 wigs are stored at BRB, all of which are made of real human hair. The longest wig,

featured in David Bintley's *E=mc²*, measures over one metre.

864 cans of silver sparkle body paint have been used by dancers playing the role of snowflakes in *The Nutcracker*.

660 performances of *Swan Lake* have been given since 1990, in 14 different countries, including Thailand, the US, South Korea, Israel, Japan and New Zealand.

500 costumes are needed for each full-length, three-act ballet, such as *Swan Lake*.

619 performances of *The Nutcracker* have been given, of which 598 have taken place at

Birmingham Hippodrome.

421 full days have been spent by the company in daily class since 1990, at a rate of 7.5 hours a week, 337.5 hours a year and 8,437.5 hours in 25 years.

270 weeks of performances by BRB have been given at its home of Birmingham Hippodrome since 1990.

150 different ballets have been performed by BRB at the Hippodrome.

58 brand-new ballets by 28 choreographers have been premiered by BRB, including 21 by Sir David Bintley.



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Wonder Woman 1984

CERT PG (151 mins)

Starring Gal Gadot, Connie Nielsen, Pedro Pascal, Chris Pine, Kristen Wiig
Directed by Patty Jenkins (USA)

Gal Gadot returns with her Lasso of Truth and impressively indestructible bracelets in the follow-up to 2017's Wonder Woman.

The first movie was that rarest of beasts, a DC Extended Universe film that wasn't utterly panned by the critics - so there's plenty riding on this much-anticipated sequel. The story finds Wonder Woman pitting her demigoddess wits against the wicked Cold War forces of sinister supervillains Maxwell Lord and Cheetah...

Lasso and bracelets at the ready...

Released Fri 2 October



EDITOR'S CHOICE

Film highlights released in October...

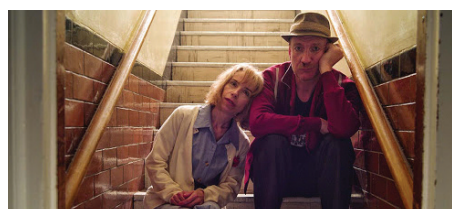
Eternal Beauty

CERT 15 (95 mins)

Starring David Thewlis, Billie Piper, Sally Hawkins, Penelope Wilton
Directed by Craig Roberts (UK)

A stellar cast of much-loved British thespians lend their considerable talent to this stylish and thought-provoking debut offering from actor-turned-director Craig Roberts. Having caused a significant stir in the Oscar-winning *The Shape Of Water*, Sally Hawkins is at it again here, starring as a woman whose battle against paranoid schizophrenia is brutally undermined by her thoroughly unpleasant and utterly self-centred family. David Thewlis' character of aspiring musician Mike provides her with a welcome port in a storm...

Released Fri 2 October



I Am Woman

CERT 15 (116 mins)

Starring Evan Peters, Tilda Cobham-Harvey, Danielle Macdonald, Matty Cardarople
Directed by Unjoo Moon (USA)



When Australian singer Helen Reddy - who died in September at the age of 78 - arrived in New York with her three-year-old daughter in the mid-1960s, she had nothing more than a suitcase and \$230 to her name. Within five years she had become a global superstar and seen her power anthem, *I Am Woman*, adopted by the increasingly assertive feminist movement...

This sensitively told biography has garnered plenty of praise after showing at a number of internationally renowned film festivals.

Released Fri 9 October

Connected

CERT tbc

With the voices of Abbi Jacobson, Danny McBride, Maya Rudolph, Olivia Colman
Directed by Michael Rianda & Jeff Rowe (USA)

When the not-altogether-functional Mitchell family head off on a road trip to deliver daughter Katie to her new college, their 'bonding' experience is interrupted by a scary tech uprising. As electronic devices across the globe take control, the Mitchells find themselves battling to save the planet - assisted only by two friendly malfunctioning robots and whatever level of family teamwork they can manage...

An animated movie, the film is produced by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, who previously collaborated on the *Cloudy With A Chance Of Meatballs* movies and the highly acclaimed *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse*.

Released Fri 9 October



Film highlights released in October...



The War With Grandpa

CERT PG

Starring **Robert De Niro, Uma Thurman, Christopher Walken, Jane Seymour**
Directed by **Tim Hill (USA)**

Expect rude humour and pranks aplenty in this star-studded romp from the admittedly not always reliable shared pen of Tom J Astle and Matt Ember, whose previous writing credits include the execrable rom-com, *Failure To Launch*.

Tim Hill's the man at the helm, so if you've loved his previous work - including *Muppets From Space*, *Alvin And The Chipmunks*, *The*

SpongeBob SquarePants Movie and *Garfield: A Tail Of Two Kitties* - a right royal laughter fest may well be on the cards for you. The storyline's a straightforward one. Sixth-grader and all-round-average kid Peter (Oakes Fegley) is none too pleased when his recently widowed grandfather, Ed (De Niro), not only moves into the family home but is also given his bedroom. What's an ousted boy to do but try his very best to get the uber-annoying pensioner to sling his elderly hook... Problem is, it turns out Ed isn't interested in going anywhere

Released Fri 16 October

Cordelia

CERT tbc (88 mins)

Starring **Michael Gambon, Johnny Flynn, Catherine McCormack, Alun Armstrong**
Directed by **Adrian Shergold (USA)**

Haunted by past events, a young woman starts to unravel when she's left alone in her apartment... "I wanted to explore one weekend in this character's life, where everything starts to implode for her," explains the film's director, Adrian Shergold. "Did this happen? Is this weekend real? Or is it a figment of Cordelia's imagination?"

Released Fri 23 October



A Call To Spy

CERT tbc (123 mins)

Starring **Sarah Megan Thomas, Stana Katic, Radhika Apte, Linus Roache**
Directed by **Lydia Dean Pilcher (USA)**

What do you get if you bring together a female British intelligence officer, an American woman with a wooden leg and a female Indian Muslim pacifist?...

A brand spanking new Nazi-fighting spy unit, that's what!

Inspired by true stories, *A Call To Spy* follows the adventures of three 'plucky gals' as they play a key role in undermining the Nazi regime in France during World War Two. The movie has done outstandingly well at numerous film festivals - including Canada's annual Whistler event, at which 97% of people chose it as their favourite movie.

Released Fri 23 October



The Courier

CERT tbc (111 mins)

Starring **Benedict Cumberbatch, Merab Ninidze, Rachel Brosnahan**
Directed by **Dominic Cooke (UK)**

This autumn is certainly a bonanza season for spy-movie fans. Not only is there Jimmy Bond's return (see opposite page) and *A Call To Spy* (see elsewhere on *this* page), there's also this fascinating and true story of British businessman Greville Wynne (Benedict Cumberbatch). Along with his Russian source - Soviet spy Oleg Penkovsky - Wynne provided MI6 with crucial information that helped defuse the Cuban Missile Crisis back in 1962.

The film made its bow, under the title *Ironbark*, at this year's Sundance Film Festival, where it was warmly received.

Released Fri 30 October



Relic

CERT PG (89 mins)

Starring **Emily Mortimer, Robyn Nevin, Bella Heathcote, Jeremy Stanford**
Directed by **Natalie Erika James (UK)**

When the elderly Edna goes missing, daughter Kay and granddaughter Sam travel to her creaky old house in the mist-shrouded forest and end up experiencing more than they bargained for... Australian director Natalie Erika James' feature debut is a sinister nail-biter that received a massive thumbs-up when it premiered at Sundance early this year.

Released Fri 30 October



No Time To Die

CERT tbc (163 mins)

Starring **Daniel Craig, Ana de Armas, Ralph Fiennes, Léa Seydoux**
Directed by **Cary Joji Fukunaga (USA)**

Daniel Craig picks up his Licence To Kill for the fifth and final time in an adventure that sees everybody's favourite British secret service agent pitting his now-fiftysomething wits against a mysterious villain armed with dangerous new technology.

Actually, in this one, Bond has become everybody's favourite *former* British secret service agent, having retired to an idyllic life of peace and tranquility in sun-kissed Jamaica. But what's a highly trained ex-double-O operative meant to do but put down his vodka martini (shaken, not stirred) and spring into action when CIA pal Felix Leiter turns up asking for help... Craig has been a massive hit as Ian Fleming's famous super-spy, and is surely making the right decision by handing in his Walther PPK at the age of 52. Roger Moore played the role until he was nearly 60, a decision that did neither him nor the Bond legend any favours.

Released Thurs 12 November



CRITIC'S CHOICE

more films released in November...

The Duke CERT 12a (96 mins)

Starring **Helen Mirren, Jim Broadbent, Fionn Whitehead, Aimée Kelly, Craig Conway**
Directed by **Roger Michell (USA)**



Even by his own remarkable standards, Jim Broadbent is in exceptional form in this five-star offering based on an amazing true story. Broadbent plays Newcastle resident Kempton Bunton, a man who, in the early 1960s, allegedly popped down south to the National Gallery and half-inched a £140,000 painting of the Duke of Wellington by Spanish artist Francisco Goya... Helen Mirren as Mrs Bunton rises beautifully to the challenge of matching Broadbent's brilliance.

Released Fri 6 November



Soul CERT PG (90 mins)

With the voices of **Jamie Foxx, Tina Fey, Quest Love** Directed by **Pete Docter & Kemp Powers (USA)**

This computer-animated comedy sees middle-school band teacher and wannabe jazz musician Joe Gardner finding himself transported from the streets of New York to The Great Before -

a fantastical place where new souls are given their personalities, quirks and interests before they go to earth. Teaming up with a particularly precocious soul known as 22, Joe determines to return to his life - and finds himself learning a few invaluable lessons along the way...

Released Fri 27 November



GOING WILD...

A prestigious exhibition highlighting the breathtaking beauty of the natural world arrives in the Midlands this autumn. The 56th Wildlife Photographer Of The Year explores the world's richest habitats and offers an insight into the behaviour of a plethora of earth's creatures. Chosen by an international panel of experts, each image tells a fascinating story about the photographer's connection with the natural world.

This year's Wildlife Photographer Of The Year competition attracted more than 50,000 entries - with professional and amateur snappers all vying for the sought-after title.

Winning images are chosen for their creativity, originality and technical excellence - like the image above, which is the work of Hannah Vijayan from Canada, who was highly commended in the 15 to 17-year-old category.

Titled **The Perfect Catch**, Hannah's image shows a brown bear pulling a sockeye salmon from the shallows of a river in Alaska's Katmai National Park, where tourists gather to observe a concentration of bears catching salmon leaping up the falls. Hannah chose to capture a quieter scene and different style of fishing, with the large female Alaskan brown

bear choosing to immerse her head under water to look for her prey. Her reward is a nutrient-rich sockeye still in its ocean form - before it has developed its reproductive red colour and pronounced jaws.

An image sure to give arachnophobics the shivers is Jaime Culebra's **The Spider's Supper**.

The detailed photograph is highly commended in the Behaviour: Invertebrates section of the competition.

The image shows a large wandering spider pierce the egg of a giant glass frog with digestive juices before sucking its liquefied prey. It is one of 11 known species of wandering spider, which are thought to be key predators of these small, often translucent amphibians.

The spiders shelter in rainforest plants during

the day and hunt at night, usually by ambushing prey that ventures close enough. Jaime set up his shot to capture the precise moment the female spider grasped the thin jelly coating between her fangs, steadying the egg with her long, hairy palps. One by one, over more than an hour, she slowly devoured all the eggs.



UK photographer Matthew Maran's **The Rat Game** shows a young fox holding on tight to her trophy of a dead brown rat. Matthew spent four years photographing the foxes that live on a North London allotment. This image - highly commended in the Behaviour: Mammals section of the competition - was taken on an August evening as Matthew lay watching the youngsters at play. As one of them exploded out of the bushes with a dead rat in its mouth, the other three then began squabbling over it and a tug-of-war developed. When one got the prize, it would repeatedly toss it into the air and catch it.



Reflecting the talent of young UK photographer Evie Eastbrook, **Paired Up Puffins** is highly commended in the 11 to 14-year-old category. Evie's image shows a pair of Atlantic puffins, in vibrant breeding plumage, pausing near their nest burrow on the Farne Islands. Every spring, these small islands off Northumberland attract more than 100,000 breeding pairs of seabirds. While guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes and fulmars crowd onto the cliffs, puffins nest in burrows on the grassy slopes above. Evie concentrated on this pair, aiming for a characterful portrait.



Peeking Possums, by Australian photographer Gary Meredith, sees two common brushtail possums - a mother and her joey - peeking out of their hiding place under the roof of a shower block in a holiday park in Yallingup, Western Australia. Gary had been eyeing up his subject all week. They popped up at sunset and kept an eye on campers until dark, before squeezing through the gap and heading to a peppermint tree where they would feed on its leaves. Ranked in the Urban Wildlife section, Gary's photograph captures the possums' vulnerability and resourcefulness.



This competition has an outstanding reputation in attracting the world's very best photographers, naturalists and young photographers. But there has never been a more vital time for audiences all over the world to re-engage with the natural world - and what better way than this inspiring and provocative exhibition

Dr Tim Littlewood, Executive Director of Science at the Natural History Museum

Amazon Burning by UK photographer Charlie Hamilton James is highly commended in the Wildlife Photojournalism: Single Image category. Charlie has been covering deforestation in the Amazon for the past decade, and this image captures a fire burning out of control in Maranhão state, northeastern Brazil. The image highlights a single tree which remains standing, almost in defiance. The fire would have been started deliberately, to clear a logged area of secondary forest for agriculture or cattle farming.



Tomohon Market in northern Sulawesi, Indonesia, is the subject of **A Risky Business**, by French photographer Quentin Martinez.

Another highly commended in the Wildlife Photojournalism: Single Image category, **A Risky Business** shows a market trader slicing up fruit bats while surrounded by his other wildlife wares: pythons to his right, and bamboo-skewered 'bush' rats beneath them. Quentin was struck by the juxtaposition of contrasting economies: the name-brand clothes of the stallholders and the wild-animal body parts.



Italian photographer Andrea Pozzi hiked for hours to capture this image of the Araucanía region of Chile - named after its Araucaria trees. Taken from a ridge overlooking the forest after sunset, **The Forest Born Of Fire** emphasises the vista's rich colours. The trunks gleam like pins scattered on the landscape, and the image is framed to create the feeling that the whole world is clothed in this strange forest fabric. Andrea had been enchanted by this sight a year previously and had timed his return to capture it.



Wildlife Photographer Of The Year shows at The Gas Hall, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, from Saturday 17 October until Sunday 7 February. Tickets are £7.50 for adults and £3 for children & students, with under-threes going free.



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Ikon Gallery, Birmingham,
until Sun 22 November

"I am aware of our responsibility for drastic changes of climate, extinctions of species and all kinds of living organisms," says Krištof Kintera, a Czech artist widely acclaimed for his sculptural, often kinetic works. "And therefore we'll face, sooner or later, fatal problems. It is our shame; it is my shame."

This Ikon exhibition, installed across both galleries and also expanding into the public realm, is the most comprehensive presentation of Kintera's work ever to be mounted in the UK. Featuring new, recent and archival pieces, the show focuses on present-day 'apocalyptic environmental issues', but manages to do so with an evident sense of humour, albeit a dark one.

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Birmingham Revolutions

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, until Sunday 28 February

Still available to view at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery are pre-lockdown exhibitions Birmingham Revolutions: Power To The People and Dressed To The Nines.

Voting reform, nuclear disarmament, trade unionism, anti-racism and human rights all feature in Power To The People, a presentation exploring the city's vibrant and varied history of protest and activism. Dressed To The Nines, meanwhile, focuses on the subject of dressing up and going

out. Covering the period from around 1850 up to the present day, the exhibition highlights some of the changes which have occurred in the types of clothing worn for special occasions.

Garments featured in the show include a 1930s beaded evening dress, an embroidered court uniform which belonged to Neville Chamberlain, and cocktail dresses by Christian Dior and Norman Hartnell.

Oh, and shoes. Lots and lots of shoes...

Thirteen Ways Of Looking

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, Fri 2 October - Sunday 13 December

Contemplating big questions such as where art belongs, where it's experienced and who it's addressing, Thirteen Ways Of Looking brings together the work of (yes, you guessed it) 13 artists and curators. The exhibition takes its inspiration from a 1917 poem by Wallace Stevens entitled Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird. Stevens' 13-verse work presents multiple perspectives and viewpoints of the bird. In

so doing, it highlights the importance of flexibility and fluidity when creating space for multiple forms of experience, knowledge and understanding.

The Herbert exhibition very much borrows from the poet's approach, presenting international, multicultural, multi-faith and feminist perspectives which shift like those of the blackbird in Stevens' poem.



Fabric: Touch And Identity

Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire, until Sun 3 January 2021

The ways in which clothes and textiles conceal, reveal and seduce through the lenses of art, design, fashion, film and dance is explored in this 'playful and provocative' exhibition.

Boasting works by Vivienne Westwood, Raisa Kabir and Cathy de Monchaux, the display also features a new immersive installation by Reiko Sudo.

Subjects explored in the show include the role of fabric in shaping and communicating identity, and the part it plays in expressing sensuality and sexuality in a variety of different cultures.



20:20 Twenty Years Of Collecting Contemporary Art

New Art Gallery, Walsall, until Thurs 24 December

New Art Gallery's celebration of its 20th anniversary continues with this major exhibition. Exploring themes including the changing urban landscape, the Black Country, the impact of globalisation and people & places, the show brings together works of contemporary art collected over the last 20 years and spanning a wide range of media.

Many of the included pieces have been produced by artists who have featured in the gallery's exhibitions programme at one time or another.

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Scarefest

Alton Towers Resort, Staffordshire, Fri 9 - Sat 11 October & Fri 16 October - Sun 1 November

There's certainly no shortage of fright-tastic fun to be had at the UK's biggest theme park this Halloween, as Alton Towers once again hosts the ever-popular Scarefest - and a new spine-tingling addition, Freak Show: Toxic Junkyard. Set in an open space replicating an abandoned junkyard, the walk-through experience features menacing psycho clowns, circus rejects and malevolent misfits lurking in the shadows, plotting their next big entrance to make you tremble in your boots...

More freakish fun can be had during a tour of Altonville Mine, which is inhabited by village outcasts 'the Skin Snatchers'. Or maybe you fancy a seafaring fright aboard the infamous 'Mutiny' ghost ship, as part of the award-winning

pirate-themed attraction, Darkest Depths... The dark nooks and crannies of a dungeon are always perfect spooking spaces, and Alton Towers Dungeon is no exception, promising a 'hideously hilarious journey through Staffordshire's darkest history'...

Also new for 2020 is the Garden Lights Walk: Whispering Souls, described as an 'otherworldly' stroll through the resort's listed gardens... Freaky Fun Zone and the CBeebies Land Monster Ball provide age-appropriate spooky fun for younger visitors, while The Alton Ancestors make a welcome return for the scary season - rising from their graves to entertain visitors with some socially distanced flash mob entertainment.

Book at altontowers.com



National Sea Life Centre: A-Scarium

National Sea Life Centre, Birmingham, Sat 17 October - Sun 1 November

Step into the creepy depths of Sea Life by navigating A-Scarium's immersive trail, which takes you past some of the ocean's most weird and wonderful creatures. Discover facts about many of the sea's freakiest inhabitants, including black tip reef sharks, garden eels and big eye fish. Make sure you keep an eye out for the magical unicorn fish in the aquarium's 360-degree Ocean Tunnel. **Book at visitsealife.com/birmingham**



The Haunted Castle

Warwick Castle, Sat 24 October - Sun 1 November

Spooky tales, scary fun and themed attractions and activities should ensure visitors' spines are well and truly tingled at Warwick Castle this half-term holiday.

Ghosts, ghouls, wizards and witches abound as the popular visitor attraction goes all out to provide a Halloween adventure brimming with things that go bump in the night (*and* in the daytime!). Visitors can meet the famous Witches of Warwick, explore the gruesome truths of history in the Horrible Histories maze, search the spooky mansion, navigate the Haunted Hollows and discover even more quirky characters in 'spellbinding shows' live on the Dead Centre Stage.





Step back in time this autumn at Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge.

Open Wednesday to Sunday from 10am.

Book your timed admission now at
IRONBRIDGE.ORG.UK

Half-term events from around the region



Spooky Spectacular

West Midland Safari & Leisure Park, Bewdley, Nr Kidderminster, 10 October - 1 November

Brighten up the spookiest of seasons by taking part in West Midland Safari Park's brand new Scratchcard Trail for Halloween. Solve the mystery of the pumpkin thief and earn a sweet treat as your reward. Illuminated, themed scarecrows and hundreds of pumpkins will be on display throughout the popular 100-acre family attraction. West Midland Safari & Leisure Park is

home to a variety of exotic and unusual species, many of which you're sure to encounter during the course of the four-mile drive-through safari. Expect to see elephants, rhinos, giraffes, lions, wallabies, tigers, emus, camels, zebras, gnus, elands, ankole cattle, yaks, przewalski's horses, Asian buffaloes, wolves, llamas and all manner of antelope!

Other attractions include Land Of The Living Dinosaurs, Ice Age, African Village and an Adventure Theme Park featuring rides for all age groups. **Book at wmssp.co.uk**



Scream Train

Severn Valley Railway, Bewdley, 29 - 31 October

This all-new adults-only attraction promises to offer a real edge-of-the-seat experience. After boarding the train at Kidderminster, visitors will be shown to their own private

compartment, where they will remain trapped while monsters roam the corridors looking for blood. And who knows what else is lurking just around the next corner?...

Tickets are £20 per person, based on six people travelling together in a private compartment

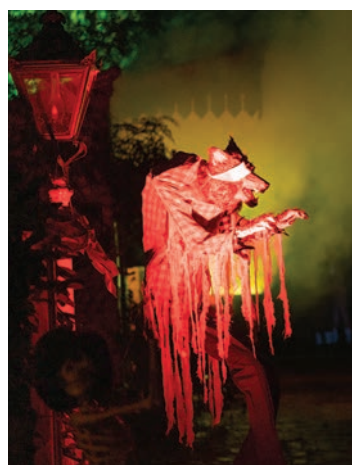
Book at svr.co.uk

Ghost Trains

Severn Valley Railway, Bewdley, Nr Kidderminster, Thurs 29 - Sun 31 October

Not for the faint-hearted, this trip through Severn Valley Railway's haunted stations unveils a host of ghosts and ghouls lurking where you'd least expect. The after-dark spooktacular invites families to make their way along the station's dark platform before boarding their very own compartment. The train's destination is Arley - home of the living dead...

Tickets are available from £15 per person, based on six people travelling together in a private compartment. **Book at svr.co.uk**



Tudor Spooktacular

Tudor World, Stratford-upon-Avon, Sat 17 October - Sun 1 November

The town of Stratford-upon-Avon gets splendidly spooky this Halloween, when one of its most haunted buildings hosts an array of creepy events for all the family to enjoy.

Daytime visitors to Tudor World can take part in a Halloween quiz, complete with a chance to win a ghoulish prize.

A fortune teller and storyteller will also be on hand on selected days. Nighttime entertainment comes in the form of a Victorian Seance Evening and Jack The Ripper Evening.

Numbers will be limited for both events due to social distancing.

Book at tudorworld.com

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Brick Or Treat Legoland Discovery Centre, Birmingham, Sat 17 October - Sun 1 November

Plenty of fang-tastic adventures await little monsters visiting Legoland Discovery Centre this month. As well as having access to millions of Lego bricks, rides, build and play zones - and a 4D cinema - visitors can also get involved in numerous Halloween-themed activities. Build your own pumpkin and add it to the site's Hall of Fame Pumpkin Patch for the chance to win a prize. Follow the clues and solve the

puzzle of the perilous pumpkins in Skavenger Hunt, and choose to have a socially distanced meet-and-greet with Scarecrow and other Lego characters.

The centre is also offering a chance to have a family picture with one of its Halloween Heroes. **Book at birmingham.legolanddiscoverycentre.co.uk**

Pumpkinfest

Park Hall Countryside Experience, Oswestry, North Shropshire, Sat 17 October - Sun 1 November

A free pumpkin for every paying child to choose, carve and take home is part of the offer at this award-winning visitor attraction. A spooky scarecrow trail through the woods and a walk through the haunted farm are sure to keep youngsters entertained. There will also be a daily Halloween fancy-dress competition for those attending in their spookiest outfits. **Book at parkhallfarm.co.uk**

Halloween at Witley

Witley Court, Great Witley, Worcestershire, Sat 24 October - Sun 1 November

There's no shortage of ghoulish fun to be had at English Heritage's Witley Court this month. Spooky Woodland Walks featuring ghost-hunting storytellers with tales of strange and silly goings-on are perfect for children aged five to 12. Each tour is outdoors and takes about 45 minutes.

Wear your scariest outfit to be in with the chance of winning a prize in the daily fancy-dress competition.

Elsewhere, Ghost Tours for visitors aged 16-plus will relay tales of ghouls, supernatural sightings and horrors from history. Definitely not something for the faint-hearted! **Book at english-heritage.org.uk**



Halloween Spook-tacular

National Forest Adventure Farm, Burton-upon-Trent, Staffordshire, Sat 10 & Sun 11 October; Sat 17 October - Sun 1 November

Enjoy all the usual fun of the farm plus a host of spooky-themed events. Check out the attraction's broomstick training via an interactive show, then venture into one of the site's three mazes. Find

the ingredients hidden in Cauldron Chaos to help you concoct a potion; see how many mummies you can find in the Mummy Maize Hunt; and be prepared for the fright of your life in the Haunted Mirror Maze. Wear your scariest costume and be in with a chance of winning a prize in the Halloween fancy-dress competition.

Book at adventurefarm.co.uk



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The Ghost Town Car – now YOU can ride in it...

The Coventry Music Museum now boasts the ultimate 2-Tone exhibit, the actual Ghost Town car, lifted straight from the Ghost Town music video. Thanks to master mechanic Steve Kearns and his team, who not only found the car, but carried each section up bit by bit, finally creating the famous 1961 Vauxhall Cresta PA car complete with the 4218 R0 number plate. Special fans have been queuing up to get into the car for the ultimate photo opportunity, one Ghost Town Car rider said: "For just a moment we felt like we were starring in our own Ghost Town video". It has already attracted the likes of: Jerry Dammers, Neville Staple and Lynval Golding, Roddy Byers, Neol Davies, John Shipley, Trevor Evans and Paul Heskett. So now I guess it's your turn.

More information ring 07971171441
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Where's Wally? Spooky Museum Search

Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge, Shropshire, Wed 21 October - Sat 31 October;
British Motor Museum, Gaydon, Warwickshire, Fri 23 October - Mon 2 November

Organised by Walker Books and Kids In Museums, this touring show invites families to hunt for Wally amongst museum collections, and to spell out a spooky phrase with letters hidden alongside mini Wally standees.

A special I Found Wally? bookmark will be awarded to those who complete the search. There's also the chance to enter the Where's Wally? & Kids In Museums grand prize draw

competition, to win an ArtFund Family Membership and a bundle of Where's Wally? goodies.

**For Blists Hill, book at ironbridge.org.uk.
For British Motor Museum, visit britishmotormuseum.co.uk**

For other Midlands venues, visit:
kidsinmuseums.org.uk

This Makes That With These: Whacky Wonders

Coventry Transport Museum,
Tues 27 October

This hands-on session provides an opportunity for young visitors to discover engineering skills using a variety of everyday items. Although themes may change due to current circumstances, sessions will continue to provide the tools and knowledge on how to build your own invention.

Book at transport-museum.com

Rocket-Fuelled Family Science Show

British Motor Museum, Gaydon,
Warwickshire, Fri 23 October -
Mon 2 November

Professor Pickle and Doctor Pumpkin will be taking up residence at the British Motor Museum at half term. The duo will host daily shows comprising interactive demonstrations and rocket-inspired science. The shows take place in a large conference room with marked-out spaces to allow for social distancing.

More rocket fun can be had on Wednesday 28 October when STEM ambassadors from MOD Kineton deliver an outdoor rocket workshop between 11am and 3pm. Children can design and build their own rocket and see how far it flies from the pneumatic launcher. Activities are suitable for children aged five-plus with adult supervision.

britishmotormuseum.co.uk



Pumpkin Flotilla

Sarehole Mill, Birmingham, Fri 30 October -
Sun 1 November

A Halloween event with a difference, the Pumpkin Flotilla sees Sarehole's mill pond lit by floating, illuminated pumpkins following a visit from the ghostly ferryman. Attendees are invited to enjoy a hot chocolate - or a bowl of Vampire's Delight soup - and listen to spooky stories ahead of viewing the flotilla. There will also be time for you to make your own lantern to guide you through the mill pond. Pumpkin Flotilla experiences last 90 minutes. Tickets cost £45 for a bubble of up to five people.

Book at ticketsbirminghammuseums.org.uk



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Bear Grylls Adventure

Birmingham International Railway Station

Celebrity adventurer Bear Grylls has certainly pulled out all the stops with this indoor/outdoor visitor attraction.

Activities include high ropes, indoor archery, indoor climbing, escape rooms and a Royal Marines-inspired assault course. Most are suitable for visitors aged eight-plus.

For the 'more courageous' (as if some of the above didn't require courage!), The Fear Zone challenges you to 'sharpen your mind and find your inner strength' by attempting to navigate the area in

complete darkness.

Alternatively, try venturing to the depths of the deep blue sea with Shark Drive. The site's tropical tank allows adventurers to get 'up close and personal' with black tip reef sharks and cownose rays.

All dive and safety equipment is provided.

Fancy experiencing the thrill of free falling at 12,000ft without having to jump out of a plane? Then iFly is probably for you. This weightless adventure takes place in a wind tunnel and comprises two one-minute flights to get the adrenaline pumping.

Book tickets at beargryllsadventure.com

Sky Reach Adventures

Telford Town Park, Shropshire
Open until 1 November

Four adrenaline-pumping activities await visitors to this Telford Town Council-run attraction. Located within the Town Park, Sky Reach Adventures comprises a climbing wall, Tree Course, Skyline Course and Quick Jump - all with different levels of challenge to suit different age groups.

The Sky Reach system allows participants to move at their own speed and make their own route choices... The climbing wall is 10 metres high, has four routes and uses two auto-belay systems to ensure climbers are always safe... The Tree Course takes visitors on a journey through the Town Park woods at squirrel height... The Skyline Course features 12 obstacles and requires balance, physical skill and nerve... Last but not least, Quick Jump allows visitors the chance to experience the sensation of free-falling through the air.

Book at skyreach.org.uk

Go Ape Tree Top Adventure

Midlands venues include Cannock, Coventry, Sherwood Forest & Wyre Forest

With 'branches' (geddit?) in some of the UK's most spectacular forests and parks, Go Ape Tree Top Adventure comprises two to three hours of flying down zip wires, leaping from Tarzan swings and navigating obstacles, crossings and rope bridges.

Tree Top Junior is suitable for 'mini Tarzans' aged six to 12 and offers an hour of tree-to-tree crossings with a zip line finale.

The Forest Segway, meanwhile, is an option for those preferring to keep their feet on the ground (well, almost!). The hour-long activity is a great way to explore the terrain of the forest.

Health & safety is a priority with all Go Ape Adventures, with age-related regulations in place for all activities. **Book tickets at goape.co.uk**





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Festive



Santa Safari

West Midland Safari Park, Bewdley

Families visiting West Midland Safari Park this festive season can meet an elf, climb on board a sleigh and head for the North Pole. And that's just for starters! Having arrived at their destination, young visitors can then say hello to Santa Claus, tell him what's on their Christmas wish-list and pose with the great

man while a helpful elf takes a picture. But wait, there's more... After meeting Santa, children can also select their own present in the elves' workshop and sample a special walk-through 'discovery trail'...

Book tickets at wmssp.co.uk

Santa's Winter Wonderland

Snowdome, Tamworth, Staffs,
Sat 14 November - Thurs 31
December

Snowdome's popular Santa Show sees the white-bearded one preparing for his big festive performance of The Twelve Days Of Christmas - but finding his efforts somewhat hampered by two elves who have a decidedly different perspective on how to present a yuletide showstopper... Suitable for all age groups, the show is just one element of the festive fun on offer at Tamworth's snowy indoor attraction.

Visitors can also explore Santa's Christmas snow trail, take a walk through an enchanted forest, enjoy a game of snowballs, hitch a ride on a sledge, meet Santa's furry friends and check out the brand new traditional children's carousel. **Book tickets at snowdome.co.uk**



Luminate Light Trail

Coombe Abbey Country Park, Wed
25 November - Wed 23 December

Described as a 'timeless experience to be enjoyed by all, young and old alike', Luminate at Coombe takes visitors along a mile-long trail comprising 'stunning lighting elements and fabulous light play, all set to ambient music'. **Book tickets at luminate.live/coombe-abbey**



Steam In Lights

Severn Valley Railway, Bridgnorth, Shropshire, Fri 27 & Sat 28 November & various dates in December

Magical creatures, sparkling lights, flurries of snow and plenty of thrills are all present and correct on this sure-to-be-memorable illuminated adventure. Steam In Lights debuted in 2019, and like all good visitor attractions is aiming to be 'bigger and better' this year. Board your private compartment at Bridgnorth station, then sit back, relax and enjoy the ride as your train steams out

into the darkness and the magic unfolds.

Passengers can then immerse themselves in a story of mischief and mystery, helping to make the lights shine along the line during their quest to find the Christmas Cacklers.

The Steam In Lights train journey lasts around an hour, travelling from Bridgnorth to Hampton Loade and back. **Book tickets at svr.co.uk**



TAKING LIBERTIES

Geoff Norcott has been a regular on the comedy circuit for a number of years now. His writing credits include *Have I Got News For You*, *8 Out Of 10 Cats* and *Judge Romesh*. He's also a regular correspondent on satirical news show *The Mash Report*. This month, Geoff resumes his *Taking Liberties* tour, where he'll be talking about the challenges of being a right-wing comedian in a left-leaning industry. What's On recently caught up with him to find out more...

What's your story in terms of becoming a comedian, Geoff - was it a long-held dream fulfilled or a sudden and unexpected lightbulb moment?

It will probably annoy the modern 'career comedian', but I did fall into it. I was just messing about with an old mate doing a double act. He decided it wasn't for him, so I egotistically decided to honour the dates as myself. It was a mere six years before I learned how to be funny on my own!

How has the pandemic and lockdown impacted the material in your show?

I think it's made the show better because so much has happened since lockdown, and comedy does well throwing light in shade. Plus I can do an impression of blokes in petrol stations with a t-shirt pulled up over their nose.

What do comedians do during pandemic lockdowns?!

We're just like everyone else - we do more stuff online. That was fine for a while, but there was a point when I was doing one show and had to mute a bloke because his dog was barking. From *Live At The Apollo* to doing crowd control on a laptop!

You've said you don't like being told what to do, but is there anything we *should* be told to do?

Yes. Remember that social media is just the

stuff people type whilst sitting on the toilet. The importance it's given is bizarre. You could get cancelled for something stupid you wrote while passing the time of day between movements.

What's your view on free speech in comedy - are there any limits, and if so, what are they?

The limit is the audience. On the whole, people are decent. If you get a joke wrong, the audience will soon let you know in the form of silence or contempt. It's a great system.

Why are there so few right-leaning comedians?

Well, based on my Twitter feed since that BBC announcement, it's because we're racist, sexist and exactly like Bernard Manning! The serious answer is there are a few more than there seem, but not everyone wants to talk about it.

Why is it, do you think, that Tories are 'shy'?

I'm not sure they are so much these days. The moment the Labour Party got investigated for racism, it became less obvious to treat it as a simple case of goodies and baddies.

Who's the comedian from a different generation you most admire and why?

I love Dave Allen. He could do it all. One-

liners, stories, observational. And he never seemed that desperate for the laughs. They seemed like an accidental consequence of the things he was saying.

You've said you like to take ideas on their merit, but which 'woke' position/idea/belief has the least merit for you, and which has the most?

I think promoting the idea that straight white men are evil is a tough sell in a country where a large chunk of the people are straight, white and male. I think people should always look to progress the idea of equality, but not presume that everyone will think the same way as their campus discussion forum on gender hate crimes.

How have Midlands audiences tended to respond to your politics by comparison with audiences elsewhere?

For whatever reasons, Midlands audiences seem to take themselves the least seriously. Shrewsbury punters also like to have their reference points acknowledged, and laugh at outsiders for not having enough money for that bloody toll bridge.

.....

Geoff Norcott performs at The Glee Club, Birmingham, Sunday 18 October & Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa on Friday 16 April



UP FOR A LAUGH!

With the Birmingham Comedy Festival returning in October, we caught up with Maureen Younger - leading female comic on the city circuit - to chat about the award-winning event, women in comedy, and the challenges facing the live entertainment industry as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic...

How long have you been involved in comedy in Birmingham, Maureen?

I started MY Comedy Birmingham in Kings Heath in 2009, originally as a one-off, but it sold out so I kept on going! Dave, who runs Birmingham Comedy Festival, then asked me to be on the selection committee for the Breaking Talent Award in 2014, and I've been doing that ever since. I think shows and awards like this are so important to highlight

what's going on in the Midlands. I'll always back Birmingham Comedy Festival as a whole because I think they're so supportive to us comics and really affordable too. I love gigging in Birmingham, and there's a really good comedy scene here. I have to say that Midlands audiences are some of my favourites, some of the nicest in Britain. Every comic I know loves gigging in the Midlands.

Where can we catch you at Birmingham Comedy Festival this year?

It's all still very uncertain on the live comedy front. I'm going to be a guest on Objectivity with James Sandy, which is a series on Switch FM as part of the festival. It was really interesting. We discussed these objects that mean something to me for different reasons, and he'd really done his research! It definitely makes you think about what

objects mean to you, whether that be The Family Object, The Dark Object or The Random Object. My random object was actually from my time studying in the old Soviet Union - although I still pretend to be 38, so don't work out the maths on that one...

Next year's edition of the Birmingham Comedy Festival marks its 20th anniversary. How do you think the comedy circuit has changed over that time?

I think 20 years ago the TV comic was only just starting to come out on top. But now, you have the issue as a promoter that you can put on a gig with a load of really great comics and it won't sell too well. Having a TV name definitely makes it easier, but I think it's a shame because people are missing out on so much great comedy just because they haven't seen the act on TV. I was in Band Of Brothers as an angry German housewife, but I don't think that's quite what they're looking for! It's a bit disappointing. There are certainly more opportunities for women than when I started. At that time, you'd only ever get one woman on the bill if you were lucky, but now you might even get two!

Getting more women on the bill was the idea behind your MY Comedy gigs, then?

The motivation behind it when we first started was exactly that - that you could never get more than one woman on a bill. You wouldn't even get a woman alongside a black comic; only one 'speciality act' is what one promoter called it. There was this idea too that having more than one woman on the bill meant that people wouldn't come. MY Comedy was to prove that it was possible; you can have an all-female bill and people will come!

It's a safe environment, not only for the performers but for the audience too. The situation has changed somewhat because now you *will* get more than one woman on the bill for standard gigs, but I think my audience in particular likes the fact it's a different atmosphere. Some comedy gigs - not all, though - can be quite lairy and feature misogynistic or other derogatory material. I think at MY Comedy we really promote a friendly, inclusive environment. Maybe the reasons we set the gig up in the first place have become less valid, but it still feels like a very nurturing space. It's the same as when you go to an urban gig - it just has that different kind of vibe that you don't get at a mainstream gig.

What obstacles do you think women in comedy face?

The assumption is that women aren't funny. There's no female comic on this earth that hasn't had someone come up to them - usually also a woman - and say, 'I usually don't like female comics, but you're really good!'. They mean it as a compliment, but if you ask them about other female comics, they can't even name one. The standard for comedy is that a straight white man goes out on stage and talks about himself - and he'll be judged on how funny he is. That's stand-up. That's the 'norm'. If a woman goes on stage, or if a black person goes on stage, and we talk about ourselves, we're no longer talking about the norm. The assumption is that women will only appeal to women, a few gay men and maybe the odd vegan. Whereas the assumption when a straight white man talks about himself is that everyone will be interested - but as we well know, that's really not the case!

Every female comic will be judged for always talking about themselves, or for talking about being a woman too much. No one would go up to a male comic and say, 'hey, that was too blokey, and stop talking about your girlfriend or wife so much. We know you're straight and male, but you don't have to shove it down our throats all the time!'. Nobody would do that! But if a gay person 'banged on' about their love life, the reaction would be entirely different. Women are really pleased to hear their own voice reflected back at them from a female comic because they don't get that too often in live comedy, TV and films. Particularly if you're a middle-aged or older woman, you don't hear your own voice anywhere.

You present podcasts, such as Women Talking B*locks, with other female comics, as well as MC'ing your online comedy gigs. Do you think that podcasts and other online or radio content could ever replace live comedy?

It's a whole different kettle of fish. Nothing can ever compete with live comedy. The energy you get from being in the same room as the audience for live comedy, and even theatre, can't be replicated elsewhere. It's like a tennis match: back and forth, back and forth, between audience and performer. In fact, the interaction between the act and the audience can actually make the comic funnier. It's all about rhythm and timing. Whereas when I do Zoom gigs, it's more of a comedy monologue, and podcasts become just funny exchanges between you and a

friend - the audience is silent. But in the absence of live comedy, it's been the best available to us.

How are you feeling about the changes live comedy is facing right now?

It's scary because as soon as lockdown started, all our gigs disappeared - and I live off performing live. For comedy, you want the exact opposite of lockdown: a small room with everybody crowded together. It was weird to try and think of ways that I could keep performing. So I've been running MY Comedy Chats every Thursday over Zoom, which is a comedy chat show essentially. I'm starting up MY Comedy Birmingham at Kitchen Garden Cafe again now, but with a lot less people. Work opportunities are few and far between, but even when we're getting gigs, we're getting paid a lot less.

What do you hope for the future of comedy in the UK?

I would love it if people went to comedy nights without caring if there was a TV credit or not... like it used to be, where people knew that it was a good local club and the promoter knew how to pick quality acts. Without small clubs for comics to learn and develop in, we wouldn't have the Michael McIntyres and Frankie Boyles. Great little venues with a fantastic performance space that were run really well are closing down right now. On the reduced audience capacity right now, they just won't be able to pay their staff and the acts. They're a huge loss to local communities, and I think they desperately need to be preserved.

It's the same with other entertainment industries. No band starts off playing the O2! People reckon The Beatles were so good because they spent so many hours doing live gigs in bars and other venues that nobody had ever heard of. Then The Beatles blew up and now The Cavern in Liverpool is famous. In order to be a good comic, you have to put in those same hours gigging - and without the small venues, that won't happen. It's hard to know when we will get back to 'normal', or if we ever will. Coming out the other side of coronavirus, there will probably be far fewer venues and, consequently, far fewer comics. It will be a massive shame. I hope we can find some positives coming out the other side.

Birmingham Comedy Festival runs from Friday 2 to Sunday 11 October. To find out more, visit bhamcomfest.co.uk

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REVIEW: Tasca Dali Award-winning restaurant offers a perfect getaway for six

In an age of enhanced social distancing, 'support bubbles', 'second spikes' and Covid-safe dining, one could be forgiven for thinking that a night of traditional tapas and drinks might easily end up being yet another casualty of the coronavirus crisis.

With tapas being an eating-out experience built on sharing, socialising and the leisurely enjoyment of one's surroundings, it takes an impressive calibre of restaurateur not only to survive but thrive in this 'new normal'.

Little wonder, then, that the award-winning Tasca Dali tapas bar & restaurant has taken the challenge in its stride, providing patrons with a fully authentic evening of Covid-secure dining.

The eatery boasts a range of seasonal dishes, cooked fresh from the oven using only the finest Mediterranean ingredients and all served within the effortlessly relaxed surroundings of an intimate bijoux bar.

Sister restaurant to the newly opened FlamenCo Tapas Bar in West Street and proud winner of the Best Spanish Restaurant of

the Year award at the inaugural Restaurant Awards: Midlands Edition, this thriving staple of Warwick's extended high street exudes traditional Spanish warmth from the moment you step over the threshold.

Small but perfectly formed, Tasca Dali's innovative yet discreet approach to ensuring customer safety is to be admired. Unobtrusive in design and fully at one with the restaurant's unique intimacy of scale, the understated addition of perspex screens separate diners into neat near-perfect 'bubbles'. These makeshift 'booths' provide an added injection of romance to the neo-gothic surroundings, complete with upturned kegtables, wine-coloured walls of peacock blue, terracotta and olive green, ambient low-level lighting and open kitchen-bar.

In keeping with its relaxed ethos, Tasca Dali is unique amongst tapas restaurants in that its menu is constantly updated and ever-changing. With no traditional itemised menu of dishes to choose from on arrival, diners are instead invited to sit back, relax and let Spain come to them in the shape of a five-course tasting menu. This is updated weekly according to season and what 'market fresh' produce is available on the day. All dietary requirements and allergies are catered for when placing your order in advance. And whilst the price may be a little on the steep side at £35 per head, the conviviality of staff, coupled with the stress-free nature of the dinner service - which took place over a leisurely two hours - left me well and truly transported to sun-drenched Spanish shores.

Opening the evening with a refreshing serving of Tanqueray gin & tonic coupled with a cooling glass of Estrella Damm Spanish lager, our culinary tour of Spain kicked off with a platter of traditional entremeses. This

consisted of grand reserve serrano ham, home-made tortilla, picula olives marinated in chilli oil, 12-month aged manchego cheese and organic chorizo, and bread served with fresh olive oil, the quality of which was nothing short of exceptional.

The ideal opening to any sharing experience, every mouthful was a new journey in flavour, from the rich, earthy notes of the paprika-infused chorizo, right through to the unmistakable sweetness of the aged serrano ham. This was complemented by an accompanying trio of Spanish-inspired dips, which ranged from the tried-and-tested aioli - an intensely flavoured garlic-yoghurt dip, infused with olive oil - to the lesser-known Canarian red mojo rojo - a fiery 'fiesta' of a number consisting of garlic, red pepper, chilli, cumin and paprika. Fantastico!

We opted for a bottle of the Ruedo Vendimias (£24, or £6 per glass) from the impressive wine menu. Our convivial waiter was, in every way, attentive to our needs, whilst at the same time giving myself and my dining companion plenty of space between courses to savour our time together.

After a short pause, the culinary tour continued with a classic Spanish lentil & chorizo stew, served in traditional earthenware bowls and infused with the unmistakable flavours and passion of traditional Spanish home-cooking.

By far the surprise hit of the evening, though, came in the shape of the baked fillet of sea bream served with Spanish vegetable pisto - a richly flavoured vegetable stew not at all dissimilar to the French ratatouille. Accompanied by a dressing of extra-virgin olive oil, garlic and paprika, it was here that Tasca Dali's respect for ingredients and exacting standards of preparation came

into their own. Effortlessly light in texture and delicately seasoned, every mouthful was a joy to be savoured. As was the red pepper & tomato pisto accompaniment, the caramelised flavours of which offset the fish perfectly.

Bringing the five-course 'fiesta' to a fitting close was a generous serving of Pollo a la pepitoria. A staple of any Spanish table, it consisted of chicken cooked in white wine with fresh herbs served with new potatoes. Succulent and richly flavoured with notes of oregano, garlic and almond, and served falling from the bone, this was traditional cooking worthy of any native

Spanish table.

After indulging in so rich a feast, the homemade dessert of a classic lemon mousse - though somewhat understated - was the perfect palate cleanser and just the right portion size for my now-overstretched stomach.

For the perfect 'getaway' enjoyed from the comfort of your own living room, Tasca Dali also offers a popular takeaway service.

And for day visitors, there's the newly launched Bruncheria menu. Consisting of a delicious selection of hot and cold plates, including paella, tosta (baked breads infused with olive oil)

and tapas, it's the perfect excuse to escape the office, plan a day trip or celebrate with friends.

After a difficult few months during which Covid-19 has cast its dark shadow over the future of this buzzing tapas bar, I'm delighted to see Tasca Dali's reputation for excellence shining through. Slowly but surely, discerning diners are returning to enjoy its unique hospitality, ambience and passion for traditional Spanish produce.

From the introduction of enhanced contact tracing to ensuring its charming layout is fully compliant with current social-distancing law, Tasca Dali

has left no stone unturned when it comes to customer safety, whilst at the same time ensuring that the inherently social and joyous nature of the Spanish eating experience remains fully intact.

Salud to that! *Katherine Ewing*

Food:	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Service:	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Ambience:	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Overall value:	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
OVERALL	■ ■ ■ ■ ■

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Family-owned fudge business moves online

Make It Worcestershire campaign members Wychbold Fudge have taken their business online.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the family-owned company sold their products via local stalls and festivals, market places and independent stores across Worcestershire.

They have recently become a supplier to the Severn Valley Railway, renaming and dual-branding their now-titled Rail Road Rum & Raisin fudge.

For more information about their products, visit wychboldfudge.com.



Stratford Autumn FEASTS returns for three-week celebration of the town's food & drink scene

Stratford-upon-Avon food lovers are in for a mouthwatering treat this October (Friday 2 - Thursday 22), courtesy of a three-week celebration of the town's vibrant food & drink scene.

As part of Stratford Autumn FEASTS,

restaurants, cafes and hotels in the area will be cooking up something special, with set menus, feasting events, special promotions and competitions all featuring. For a full list of FEASTS menus and offers, visit stratfordfeasts.co.uk

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