

Worcestershire

ISSUE 412 WINTER 2020/21

What's On

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inside:

FESTIVE FILM FAVES

who will be watching what
over the Christmas holiday?



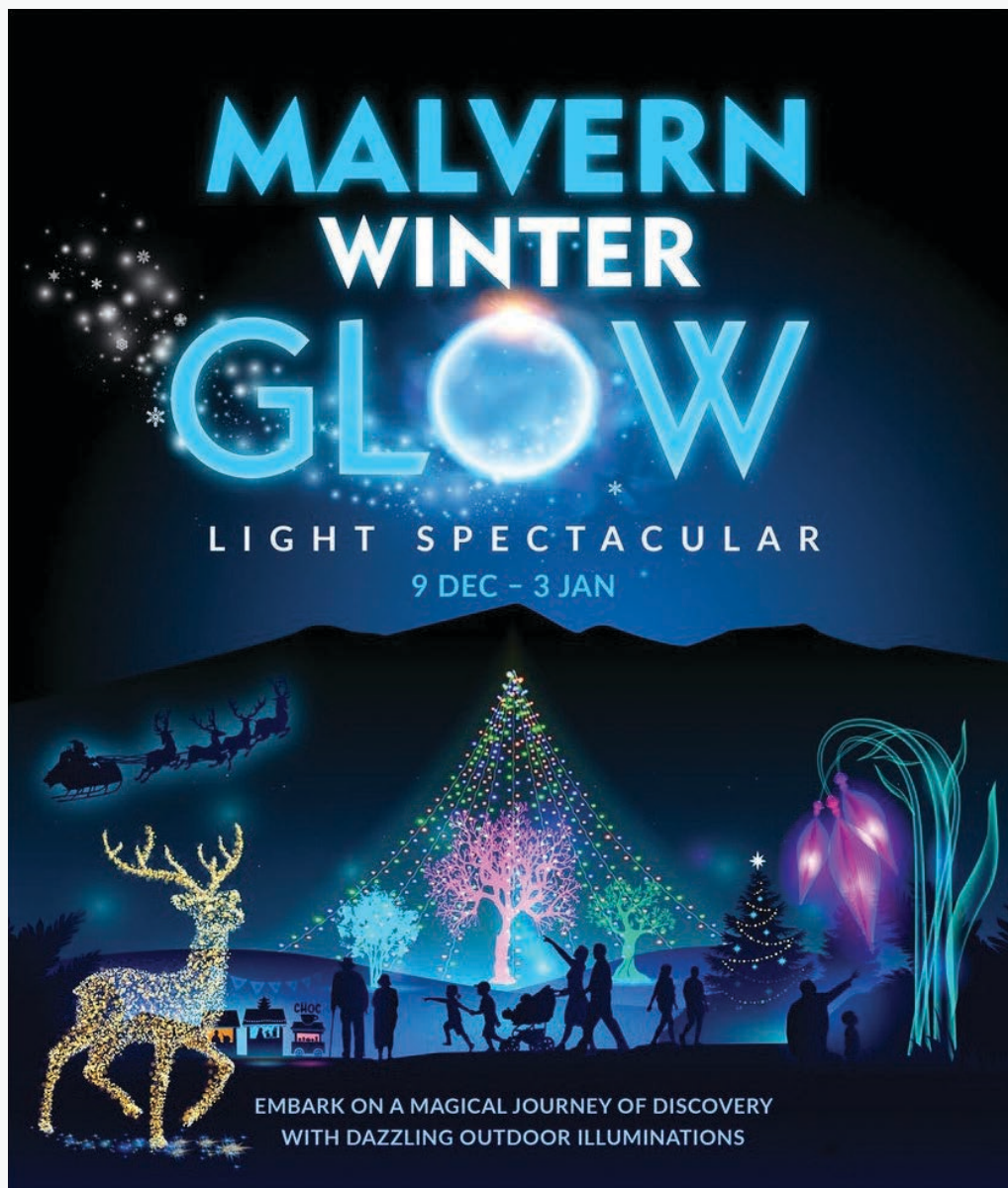
EVERYONE LOVES A DRAMA...

Must-see shows in 2021



WAITRESS

Smash-hit musical heading to
the Midlands



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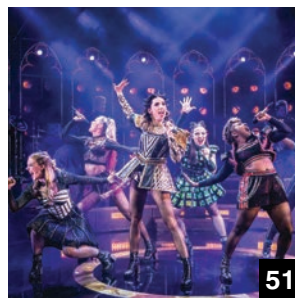
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What's On

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RSC announces winter programme for 2020

A season of 'epic tales for extraordinary times' heads up the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) programme of entertainment for winter 2020.

Performed live from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST) in Stratford-upon-Avon, Tales For Winter welcomes audiences back to the RSC with a series of stripped-back warm-up events designed to 'celebrate the essence of live theatre: an actor, a stage and a story'.

Other winter highlights include the official launch of The Boy In The Dress cast album - live streamed from the RST - Troy Story - an epic five-part retelling of the story of the Trojan War - and Festive Tales, an evening of carols, songs and Christmas readings. For more information, visit rsc.org.uk

British Motor Museum makes it into top three



The British Motor Museum has been selected as one of three finalists in the Collection category of this year's Royal Automobile Club Historic Awards.

The annual awards recognise outstanding achievements within the British historic motoring and motorsport world.

The museum was shortlisted as a result of 'hosting three exhibitions during a difficult year and through two lockdowns'.

Results will be announced on 28 January.

Coventry artist puts home town on the rap map

A 22-year-old rapper has released a debut mixtape which looks set to put his Midlands home town of Coventry on the rap map. Pa Salieu refers to Coventry as "COV - City of Violence" in his mixtape, which has received a host of positive reviews since its recent release.

Festive film fix with Luna Cinema at the NEC

A festival of film is coming to the NEC in Birmingham.

Luna Drive-In Winter Cinema will provide movie buffs with the chance to enjoy a selection of films from the safety and warmth of their own cars. Featured movies include Home Alone, Elf, Love Actually, It's A Wonderful Life, Last Christmas and Frozen 2.

The Luna Drive-In Winter Cinema can be enjoyed at the NEC from 4 to 20 December. For more information, visit thenec.co.uk



Worcester Live launches online outreach project to tackle isolation

Worcester Live has launched a new online community outreach project with the aim of reducing isolation for those who have limited access to the arts.

Set up thanks to a grant from The National Lottery Community Fund, Culture Call is a series of free one-to-one online sessions with art practitioners and freelance artists. The aim of the initiative is to help people who are isolating to still have access to music, dance and theatre.

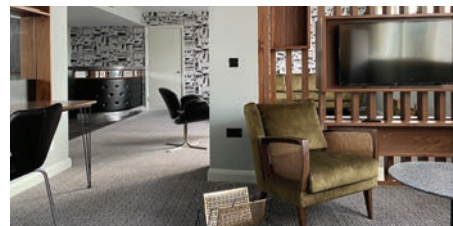
Interested parties can request further information by contacting Worcester Live's Creative Learning & Participation Administrator, Leah Adkins, via her email: leah@worcesterlive.co.uk

Coventry's Telegraph Hotel to open its doors in December

Coventry city centre's new Telegraph Hotel will open its doors to the public at lunchtime on 4 December.

After two years of construction and a £15million investment, the former Coventry Telegraph headquarters has been transformed into a luxury hotel that celebrates 'the cool mid-century style of the building'.

Created by Complex Development Projects, the hotel features a large bar, a conservatory restaurant, a conference suite, a rooftop bar and 88 individually designed air-conditioned bedrooms. For further information about the Telegraph Hotel or to book a stay or meal, visit telegraph-hotel.com



Rugby author publishes debut novel about the Coventry Blitz

A Rugby author inspired by tales from his own family history has published his debut novel.

Seen through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy from a pacifist family, Steve Gay's *The Birds That Do Not Sing* is set in the aftermath of the Coventry Blitz in 1940.

The novel is available to order from book shops as well as online. It is also available as an e-book on Amazon.

For more information, visit rookabbeypress.com

Leamington gets a festive post box

A festive post box has been installed in Leamington town centre for children to send their wish lists to Father Christmas.

Santa's Post Box has been positioned on the Parade, at its junction with Regent Street, by BID Leamington as part of the town centre's Covid-safe Christmas attractions.

The striking red box is equipped with a mini light show, which is triggered for senders to enjoy as their letter wings its way to Lapland. Senders who include their contact details on their letter will be entered into a prize draw to win £200-worth of goodies donated by local retailers.

And parents will be able to download a reply to the letter(s), which can then be personalised.



You will go to the pantomime - but not until January!

Birmingham Hippodrome and Qdos Entertainment will present an all-new production of *Robin Hood* at the city's Alexandra theatre in the new year.

The socially distanced one-act production will star Craig Revel Horwood - as the Sheriff of Nottingham - Hippodrome pantomime favourite Matt Slack, Richard Cadell & Sooty, and Black Country comedy character Doreen Tipton.

In a joint statement, Hippodrome Artistic Director & Chief Executive Fiona Allan and managing director of Qdos Entertainment Michael Harrison, who's directed the Hippodrome pantomime for the past 10 years,

said: "We're delighted to be working together to make sure that our loyal audiences in Birmingham don't miss out on the magic of pantomime this year.

"Presenting *Robin Hood* at The Alexandra allows us to see two of the city's key cultural institutions open with social distancing in place. Although on a different stage, this year's show will be designed and created by the usual Hippodrome panto creative team, and will feature all the comedy and laughter our audiences have come to expect."

Tickets for the show are now on sale from atgtickets.com

Brian Cox returning to the Midlands

Professor Brian Cox will return to Birmingham with a brand-new show next year, stopping off at the city's Utilita Arena on 2 October.

Commenting, Brian said: "I loved the 2019 arena tour because it gave me the opportunity to discuss the most profound ideas with tens of thousands of people in front of the most spectacular images of the universe.

"I hope the new show will make people think about how fortunate and precious we are, how strange and wonderful our universe is, and the limitless future we have to look forward to if we make the right choices over the coming decades."



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Children's book prize now open for submissions

The Stratford Literary Festival and independent publishers Salariya Book Company have opened their 2021 Children's Picture Book Prize for submissions. The competition, which launched in 2017, is open to unpublished and unrepresented writers and illustrators, with a prize value of £1,000. The winner will receive career advice from a leading literary agent and publicity through the Stratford Literary Festival. The winning entry could also be published by Salariya's imprint, Scribblers. The final date for entries is 31 January. The winner will be announced in late February. For details of how to apply, visit stratlitfest.co.uk/bookprize

Arnold Sports Festival heading to the Midlands

A multiple-sports event featuring appearances by Arnold Schwarzenegger is coming to Birmingham in autumn 2021. The original Arnold Sports Festival in America was co-founded 31 years ago by movie-star Schwarzenegger. The UK version will feature, among plenty of other activities, bodybuilding, powerlifting, crossFit, MMA, boxing, gymnastics, cheerleading and arm wrestling. Other event highlights include 200-plus exhibition stands, a purpose-built Arnold Schwarzenegger life-story feature, and the chance to have a go at multiple sports in the Try-Out Zone. For more information about the event, which takes place at Birmingham's NEC from 1 to 3 October, visit eventbrite.co.uk

Strictly stars join forces

Strictly Come Dancing professionals Anton Du Beke and Giovanni Pernice are joining forces in 2021 for their first ever tour together. Him & Me! will see the duo being joined by a talented cast of dancers and singers. The show stops off at Birmingham's The Alexandra on Tuesday 20 July.



Midlands youngsters heading for Narnia in 2021

Midlands youngsters will next winter be invited to step into the magical land of Narnia when a stage version of CS Lewis's classic children's story, The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe, stops off in Birmingham.

The critically acclaimed production is directed by Sally Cookson and visits The Alexandra from 30 November to 4 December 2021. To purchase tickets, visit atgtickets.com



Birmingham 2022 Games set to break new ground

The Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games will make global sport history by becoming the first ever major multi-sport event to award more medals to women than men. The medal event programme confirms that there will be 136 medal events for women and 134 for men. This will see 2022 go one step further than the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games in 2018, when there were an equal number of medals for women and men. There will also be more para sport in 2022

than in any previous Commonwealth Games. Commenting on the development, Councillor Brigid Jones, deputy leader of Birmingham City Council, said: "Knowing that Birmingham 2022 will be breaking new ground for both women's and para sport is a source of immense pride. "The event programme confirms that the significance of the 11 days of sport will transcend who wins in each sport and which nation tops the medals table."

The background of the image is a photograph of the interior of the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre. It shows a large, ornate chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and red curtains covering the stage. The seats are visible in the foreground, and the overall atmosphere is festive, with many yellow stars scattered across the image.

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to all our patrons
throughout the
*Festive Season***

visit the website
grandtheatre.co.uk
to see what's coming up in 2021



Work starts on £1.2million City Of Culture project

Work is under way on a £1.2million project to get one of Coventry's most precious cultural assets ready for UK City Of Culture 2021. Coventry-based Deeley Construction has started improvement works at Herbert Art Gallery & Museum. The project includes the addition of a new gallery and the refurbishment of the existing exhibition spaces. The work will be complete in time for the Herbert to play a major role in 2021 - including hosting the internationally renowned Turner Prize.

Festive cheer at Compton Verney

Enchanting evenings by the lakeside are on offer at Compton in the lead up to Christmas. The beautifully landscaped grounds will be transformed into a fiery landscape where visitors are invited to wander through a range of illuminated installations to warm their senses. This family friendly experience (16 - 20 December) is designed to herald the start of winter and celebrate light over darkness in the lead up to Winter Solstice. Visitors will also be able to warm up with delicious chilli and festive speciality beverages courtesy of the The Garden Shed Café. To book tickets, visit: comptonverney.org.uk



New Osmonds musical heads for Brum

A brand-new stage show telling the story of one of the music industry's most famous families and biggest-ever boybands is coming to Birmingham's The Alexandra next autumn. The Osmonds: A New Musical celebrates the career of the five brothers from Utah who became massive pop stars in the 1960s and '70s.

Featuring some of The Osmonds' best-known tracks - including Love Me For A Reason, Crazy Horses and One Bad Apple - the show stops off at The Alex from Tuesday 12 to Saturday 16 October.



James and Happy Mondays unite for Midlands show

Two of Manchester's most celebrated bands will perform at Utilita Arena Birmingham next autumn.

With a diverse sound spanning 14 studio albums released across three decades, James have sold over 25 million albums worldwide. They will be joined in Birmingham by Happy Mondays, who will be performing hits including Step On, Kinky Afro and 24 Hour Party People. The concert takes place at Utilita Arena on Friday 26 November 2021.

Rescheduled Coventry date for Kevin & Joanne

Strictly stars Kevin and Joanne Clifton have rearranged their tour dates as a result of the Covid-19 autumn lockdown.

The popular siblings will now present their An Evening With... show at Coventry's Albany Theatre on Sunday 21 February.

The production provides a glimpse into the lives of the popular duo, from their formative years growing up in a dancing family, to their modern-day successes on Strictly and beyond... For more details, visit albanytheatre.co.uk

Join The Wednesday Wave, says Worcester mask theatre company

Worcester mask theatre company Vamos Theatre is urging people to join in with The Wednesday Wave - an initiative aiming to combat loneliness in care homes.

Launched in October, the Wave sees hundreds of members of the public pledge to walk by their local care home at 3pm every Wednesday and wave at residents through their windows. Anyone who'd like to take part can simply look from their window from 3pm on Wednesdays, or head out on a walk to wave. There's also a poster available (at vamos theatre.co.uk/TWWposter) for care homes and others who would like to display one.

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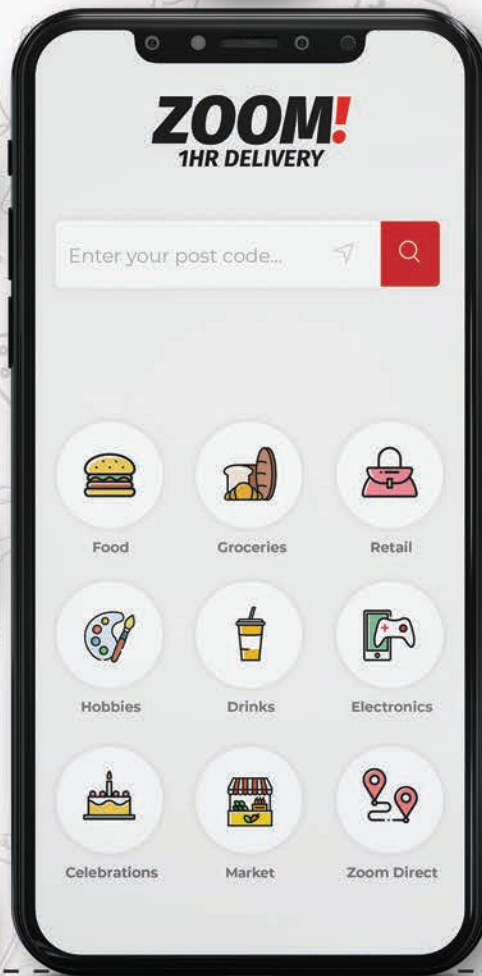
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Glynn Purnell to host an alpine-themed barbecue at rooftop bar in Coventry

The glamour of the Alps is being recreated in Coventry for the winter season, with award-winning Midlands chef Glynn Purnell making his debut appearance in the city.

The owner of the Michelin-starred Purnell's restaurant in Birmingham and the star of BBC's Great British Menu, Glynn will be providing an outdoor barbecue with an alpine flavour at the Generators rooftop bar of the new Telegraph Hotel. The date is to be announced.

The rooftop bar is being dressed by the Belgrade Theatre to create the atmosphere of an après ski bar from the 1950s. It will be renamed St Moritz - after the Swiss ski resort - for the season.

A snow machine will provide an hourly dose of powder for the powder hounds, with temporary canopies, rugs and outdoor heaters also featuring.

We Love Pizza company launches in Leamington Spa

A restaurant serving artisan sourdough pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven has opened in Leamington.

We Love Pizza can be found at 9 Regent Place, in premises previously taken by Momenti. The new eatery seats up to 30 diners and delivers to homes in a five-mile radius of the

restaurant, with collection also available.

We Love Pizza makes its dough in-house - and fresh every day - from the finest Italian flours. Guests can choose from lunchtime and evening menus. All will be available until 10pm every night.

For further information, visit: welovepizza.uk



Modern Indian restaurant launches new cocktail bar

Modern Indian restaurant Simla has launched a new cocktail bar: Zenna. The Dordon eatery prides itself on serving cutting-edge avant garde Indian cuisine with a twist, stating: "The techniques might be new, the ingredients might be global, but the focus is on unapologetic authenticity that suits every palate."

To book, visit: simlarestaurant.co.uk

Brazilian restaurant launches Fazenda At Home service

Known for serving the finest cuts of South American meat, carnivore's paradise Fazenda has launched Fazenda At Home, with UK-wide delivery. Customers can choose from 45 cuts, including signature cap of rump, fillet and sirloin, grass-fed Hereford Tomahawk steaks, Wagyu ribeye and French-trimmed Agnei Ibérico lamb racks. The company has also launched a Fazenda At Home Box, consisting of a selection of five starters, three prime meats, an accompaniment and South American delicacies.

To purchase, visit shop.fazenda.co.uk

Plans submitted for Worcester eatery

Plans have been submitted to convert the former home of Worcester Piano Shop in Barbourne Road, Worcester, into a family-run Greek takeaway restaurant.

A statement included with the application by Dimitrios Machairas from Eat Greek said: "We are a small family-owned business. We will only be open until 10pm on weekdays and Saturdays, and until 9pm on Sundays, which will not affect the tenant living above the property."

"We source all of our products ourselves from local independent shops and retailers, and we will not receive any deliveries to the store, which means the traffic will not be affected."



COVENTRY 2021

A CITY OF CULTURE

With just over five months until the launch of Coventry's City Of Culture 2021 programme, what can audiences expect in terms of theatre presentations, musical performances and visual arts exhibitions?

After much speculation about how Coventry's year as City Of Culture 2021 would progress under the cloud of Covid-19, the Trust overseeing the momentous celebration for the whole of the Midlands has confirmed that a year-long programme of events will now begin in May.

Kicking off proceedings on the 15th of the month is an inclusive production titled **Coventry Moves**. The multi-disciplinary event features city-wide participation, installation, performance, movement and digital activity, 'to create a powerful and diverse vision of the city's future'.

The creatives responsible for co-ordinating Coventry Moves are Nigel Jamieson and Justine Themen. Nigel is the creator of

opening and closing events for the Commonwealth Games and the opening of the European Capital Of Culture in Liverpool. Justine is deputy artistic director at the city's Belgrade Theatre. Six young creatives from across the city will also play a pivotal role in the concept, narration and production of the highly anticipated opener.

It's no mean feat planning and co-ordinating a 12-month-long event at any time, let alone in the middle of a pandemic. But Coventry is determined that its special year will be a resounding success. "When the city is faced with a challenge, we tackle it head on," says Chenine Bhatena, creative director of Coventry City Of Culture. "The resilience and innovation that the city is known for around the world can be seen in the events we've

announced.

"From city-wide stories to intimate experiences and small-scale events that will surprise and delight - whatever age you are, whatever brings a smile to your face, whatever makes you feel a little more alive, you will find it in Coventry City Of Culture."

Coventry's international reputation as a place of 'activists and pioneers, peace and reconciliation, innovation and invention' will be reflected in the 2021 programme. Events will showcase the city as diverse and modern, moving forward and embracing culture while at the same time connecting communities and changing lives.

Here's a taster of what will be happening during the year-long celebrations...

THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

The Walk is one of the most innovative and adventurous public artworks ever attempted.

Co-created by Good Chance Theatre, Stephen Daldry, Handspring Puppet Company, David Lan and Tracey Seaward, it centres on the 5,000-mile journey of Little Amal, a 3.5metre-tall puppet of a young refugee girl. Amal will be met by local residents during the Coventry Welcomes festival in June.

The UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) also takes place in June and is presented in association with the city's Belgrade Theatre.

As well as celebrating the centenary of acclaimed filmmaker Satyajit Ray via a selection of premieres based on the theme of 'Ray of Hope', UKAFF features a host of bold new movies and provides a platform for the next generation of British Asian film talent.

In July, acclaimed new-writing company Paines Plough presents the community-focused **Roundabout**, a unique and intimate pop-up theatre event hosting plays by 'some of the nation's finest writers'.

In August, Coventry-based Highly Sprung Theatre Company showcases a major new production featuring an all-female cast. **CastAway** centres on the environmental crisis. Using a fusion of movement, gesture and dance on a stage of floating plastic, the production draws on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (located between Hawaii and California) - a floating island of everlasting plastic that's grown to six-and-a-half times the size of the UK... CastAway will be imagined to be staged on the water in Coventry's Canal Basin, an important heritage site in the city and now a focus of cultural investment and activity.

Other theatrical works throughout the year

include a co-commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company, Coventry-based writer Chris O'Connell, playwright Chinonyerem Odimba and design consultant Tom Piper. The collaborative work - **Faith** - is presented in September and uses music, theatre, installation and ritual 'to explore what keeps us going in tough times'.

Also in September, **Theatre Of Wandering** builds on the experience of those living with dementia in 'a playful and poignant theatrical experience' involving shopkeepers, care workers and care-home residents, working together to create and perform.

In November, Belgrade Theatre's co-artistic director, Corey Campbell, and six emerging Midlands writers present a six-part digital television series titled **SeaView**. Inspired by a true story, SeaView is described as 'an urban drama celebrating the aspirations of a Black working-class family exploring urgent questions around choice and circumstance.'

MUSIC AND DANCE

One of Coventry's biggest musical names curates three days of music in the heart of the city in July. Best known from his days as frontman of The Specials and Fun Boy Three, Terry Hall curates a festival programme of intimate gigs and events at various locations. Blending international legends with contemporary pioneers, **Home Sessions** reflects Coventry's rich musical history and includes performances by Hall himself.

Launching on International Youth Day (12 August), **CVX Festival** provides a platform for regional and national artists to take a stand against violence. Rapper Jay1 is a lead ambassador for City Of Culture and will co-produce live music for CVX with his brand, ONE Wave. ONE Wave invites young people

in the city to collaborate in spreading messages of peace and unity, and also highlights how positive role models and creativity can transform lives.

VISUAL ARTS

The Turner Prize makes its Midlands debut at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum in September. The prestigious art show features work by shortlisted artists from the previous 12 months.

The Coventry Biennial takes place across the county between October and January. Showcased work explores the legacies of artist-led networks, activism and ways of teaching that have emerged from and through the local area since the 1960s.

LITERATURE AND SPOKEN WORD

A new commission between Super Slow Way and artist collective Studio Morison takes place in July. **Small Bell Rings** is a moving tribute to the written word and sees a specially designed canal boat house 'the largest collection of short stories'. The boat will travel 5.5 miles of Coventry canal, with a small bell being rung each time a book is taken from the library.

Contains Strong Language brings together various artistic practices in what will be the region's biggest poetry & performance festival. The event presents a line-up of impressive talent from across the UK.

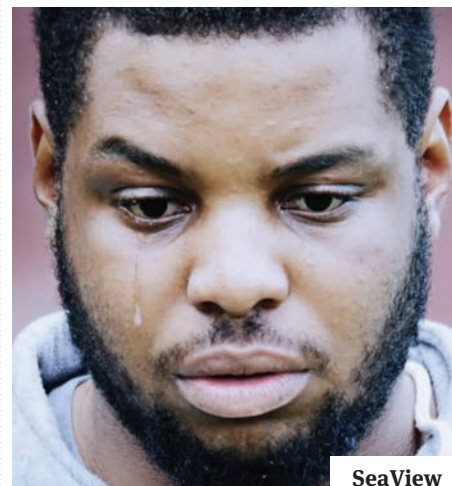
To keep up to date with all Coventry City Of Culture 2021 news and events, visit: coventry2021.co.uk



The Walk



Terry Hall



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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

Live entertainment coming up in December and January

Robin Hood

The Alexandra, Birmingham,
Sat 16 - Sun 31 January

Having hopefully kept at a safe social distance from one another while hanging out in Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood and his Merry Men make the cross-Midlands trip to Birmingham in the new year for some later-than-usual pantomime fun.

A collaboration between Birmingham Hippodrome, panto production specialists Qdos Entertainment and The Alexandra, the socially distanced one-act show replaces the Hippodrome's scheduled festive-season offering of Goldilocks And The Three Bears starring Jason Donovan (we'll have to wait till next Christmas to enjoy that one).

Craig Revel Horwood takes top billing as the Sheriff of Nottingham, and is joined in and around Sherwood Forest by Hippodrome pantomime favourite Matt Slack and Richard Cadell & Sooty.



Black Country comedy character Doreen Tipton is on board too, returning for her second consecutive Hippodrome pantomime following a star turn in last year's production of Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs.



Armonico Consort: Carols By Candlelight

Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick, Wed 23 December

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. Seasoned yuletide performers in the Collegiate Church of St Mary, Armonico here present an evening of Christmas music 'from centuries both old and new, to create a sublime festive evening'.



Beyond The Barricade At Christmas

Malvern Theatre, Wed 23 December

If you love musicals but you really can't wait for the next time Les Miserables, Miss Saigon, The Lion King, Tell Me On A Sunday, Phantom Of The Opera or Blood Brothers comes to the region, then Beyond The Barricade is the show for you.

Presented in concert format, it not only features all of the best-loved numbers from an array of hit West End musicals, but also boasts a cast of past principal performers. This special Christmas version of the much-loved production includes a selection of festive favourites.

The York Waites

St Mary's Church, Warwick,
Thurs 17 December

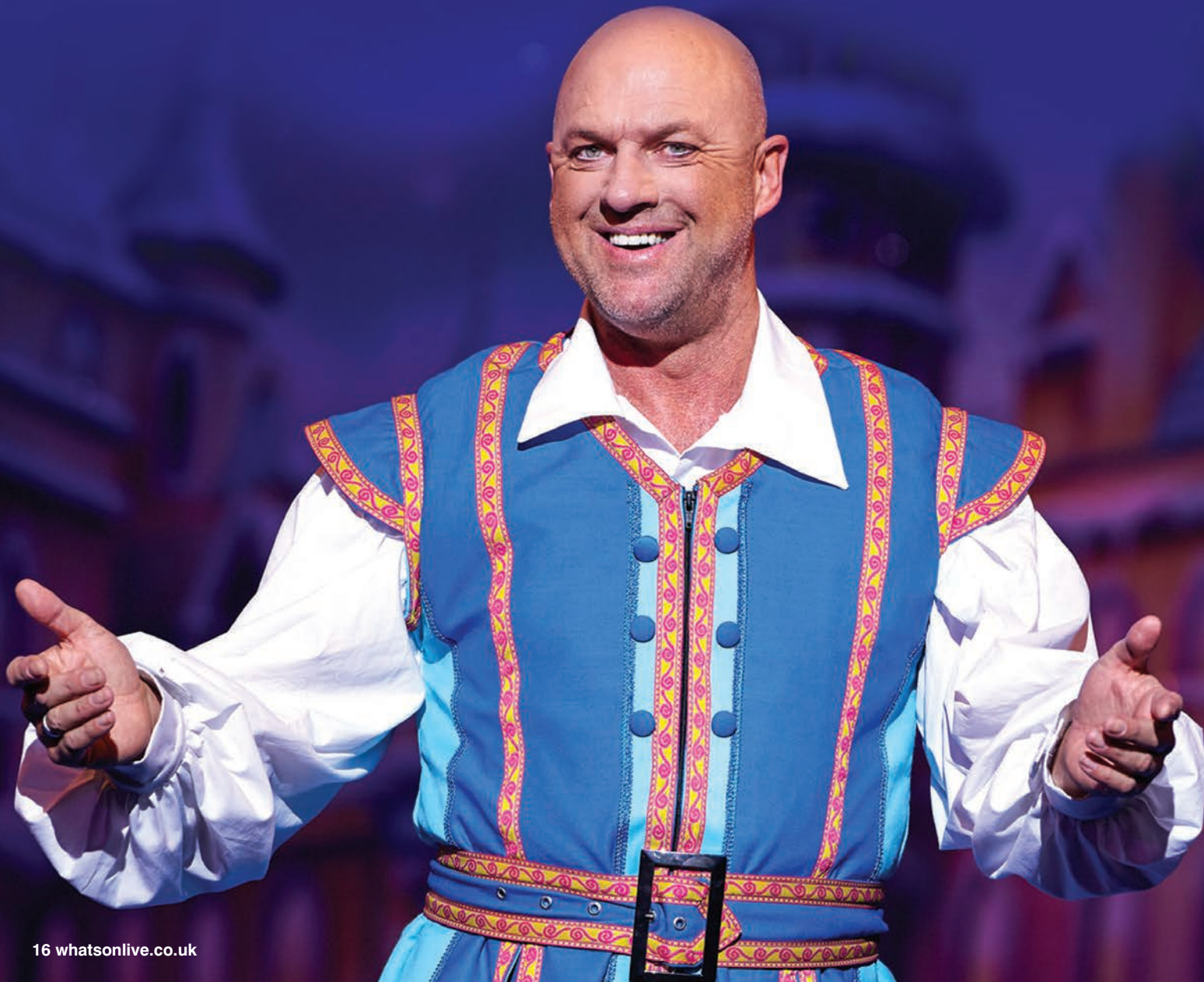
The Waites take their name from the ancient city band of York, the earliest evidence of which is found in 14th-century records. They have revived the band as it was in its 16th-century heyday, playing a wide repertoire of period European music as well as self-created arrangements of popular dance and ballad tunes.

Performing on, among other instruments, shawms, crumhorns, rustic bagpipes, sackbuts and gitterns, the Waites here celebrate the festive season with an hour-long concert featuring songs, carols and dances from across medieval and renaissance England and Europe.



MATT'S MOMENTOUS MOMENTS

Birmingham Hippodrome panto stalwart Matt Slack is without doubt one of the funniest and most entertaining performers in the business. Matt always looks like he's having the best time up on stage, so we asked him to share some of his best moments. Here's what he had to say...





**Matt Slack will star in
Robin Hood at The
Alexandra Theatre,
Birmingham, from
Friday 15 - Sunday 31
January 2021**

FIRST STAR-STRUCK MOMENT

I've worked and met with many famous faces over the years, and I never tend to get star-struck. However, when Sir Bruce Forsyth came down to the Babbacombe Theatre to film his autobiography documentary, I got to spend precious time with him both on and off stage. Huge moment for a young comic. He was an idol and a true pro!

WISH YOU HADN'T DONE THAT MOMENT

There's been a number of shows over the years where there's been a 3D section. It's a great bit of the show, plus it gives us on stage a break. The audience are given a pair of black 3D glasses and are told when it's the right time to put them on. I noticed a guy in the front row who was wearing them from the start, so I told him that this was not the 3D section of the show, and of course everyone laughed. Little did I know he was blind, until he politely pointed it out. Luckily he saw the funny side, but I felt awful. Never lose your sense of humour, regardless!

MOST PHYSICALLY DEMANDING MOMENT

I wrote and performed a lip-sync routine for Dick Whittington, where I fell off the stage into the orchestra pit onto a crash mat. That was fine, but when I rushed to get back up, I went over on my ankle. Nothing broken luckily, but the sprain was the worst possible. I had a detached ligament and still suffer

with it now. However, I finished the show, hopping through it, and then off to A&E. The things you do for a laugh! Regardless of many injuries, I've never taken a show off.

MOST VOCALLY CHALLENGING MOMENT

Performing two shows a day for six weeks with a paralysed vocal chord. That was not only physically demanding but also hugely challenging mentally. I thought I was letting the audience down by not being at my best, but how wrong I was. The support I received is something I'll never forget or ever take for granted.

MOST SURPRISING MOMENT

During a routine of The 12 Days Of Christmas, I fell into the curtain cloth, which then came down. Anyway, behind the curtain, the crew had set a dodgem car that was used for Paul Zerdin's entrance. I banged my head on it and was unconscious for a few seconds. That was a bit of a surprise!

STRUGGLED TO KEEP IT TOGETHER MOMENT

There have been many moments on stage where I've lost it in a comedic sense, and there's nothing quite like it when we, as well as the audience, are engaged in that moment. I completely lost it when Darren Day as Captain Hook got stuck in the jaws of the crocodile. He'd pressed the emergency cut-off

button by mistake and was just stuck there. I just laughed and was no help whatsoever. Eventually stage management came on and rescued him. I'm still laughing!

REALISATION THAT THIS IS THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD MOMENT

The audience reaction on my first entrance gets me every time. It's something quite special, particularly since my time in Birmingham. It's like coming out of lockdown and being allowed in a pub!

BEST AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION MOMENT

The relaxed performance is very special. To look out at an audience full of children and adults who wouldn't normally feel comfortable in that environment is, for me, a highlight of the whole run.

MOMENT YOU'D MOST LIKE TO RE-LIVE

I've experienced many big laughs during my time performing at the Hippodrome, but the biggest reaction I've ever had, and probably ever will, was the time I dropped a kid into the orchestra pit. It was a risky decision that paid off with a reaction of both shock and hilarity. The kid in question, Nicholas, loved doing it every show, and it was perfectly safe. Personally, I would've asked for danger money!



FEE-FI-FO-FUM!

festive fun with Jack and his mum!



It's panto as normal (well, almost) for Belgrade favourites Iain Lauchlan and Craig Hollingsworth, as they get ready to entertain audiences with yet more magical mayhem. Jack And The Beanstalk may have gone online this year, but that doesn't mean there'll be fewer festive frolics. What's On caught up with writer & director Iain to find out more about what viewers can expect...

What have been the particular challenges connected to producing a pantomime online, Iain?

We couldn't have a full cast because of Covid, so Craig Hollingsworth and I play most of the parts, which will give the audiences a giggle. We do have a principal boy, a princess, an ensemble guy and eight children, so we've done pretty well.

Secondly, we don't have the rehearsal time we usually have for a live show. We had two weeks' rehearsal, and then what we performed was the final performance. No time to let it bed in.

Thirdly, there's no live audience - nobody to play to and nobody to judge the timing of gags, routines etc. With no feedback in the way of reactions and laughter, we have to use our instincts to play the show.

What makes Jack & The Beanstalk a good panto choice to perform online?

It gives us so much to play with on TV. We can do things on screen that we can't do in the theatre. Things like, make characters appear and disappear before the viewers' eyes, have a massive giant played by an actor, see the beanstalk actually magically grow up to the sky, have lots of magical sparkles and effects. We have a social-distancing cow, and the infamous lemon meringue routine. Jack has so many magical elements - a giant, a fairy, magic beans, the beanstalk, a messy slosh routine, great characters like Fleshcreep and Dame Trott, and lots of fun!

What are the secrets of writing a good pantomime?

A good strong story with great characters that you care about. Telling a story is all we have to do. We have our strong story characters that drive the narrative no matter what, and this allows the comic characters like the Dame and comic to weave in and out of the story, causing a bit of mayhem and lots of fun. This, along with classic routines and great songs, completes the package.

Across the years, which of your pantomimes has been your favourite?

I enjoy all of them, but if I had to choose, I

think it would be our Beauty And The Beast. This was a challenge when we did it the first time, as the Disney film had just come out and we felt we had to give a nod to their version because that was the one the kids would know. We had to make sure our Beast was brilliant, and that his transformation from the prince was impressive. We had to make sure our baddies worked and that Beauty and her father were truly characters that the audience cared about.

I love the show because the Beast is the baddie at the beginning, but by the end everyone wants Beauty to marry him and be with him. We also have a really good Dame & son duo in the panto, which offers so much in terms of anarchy and fun.

What attracted you to the world of pantomime in the first place?

Over the years, as an actor, I've seen many pantos in lots of different venues. My first professional panto was in a tiny theatre called The Little Theatre, in Inverness. I love having the opportunity to create fun characters and work on tried-and-tested traditional routines. Also, the contact with the audience is something I love - although there are many actors who hate it! I'd seen my fair share of dreadful pantomimes and vowed that if I ever got the chance to write and direct my own, I would make them the best they could be. The audiences deserve nothing less. Bob Hamlyn at the Belgrade gave me that chance, and I've been doing them ever since.

Which panto character is your favourite to write/script?

I do love writing for the Dame, as she can be so off-the-wall and anarchic, but also crucial to the storyline. However, the best character of all to write for is Abanazar, the evil sorcerer in Aladdin. He's the baddest baddie of them all, and it's a joy to write for him.

What does Iain Lauchlan do with his time when he's not writing, directing & performing in the Belgrade pantomime?

I have my own TV studio in north Oxfordshire, where I film my own children's programmes for my online channel,

CheekyChimpsTV.com

I also direct, write and produce programmes for other people who film in my studio. If I'm not working in the studio, then I'm in my workshop making someone something. I've just finished oak gates for our local church. I'm a carpenter as well as a performer. Also, my new granddaughter takes up a bit of time!

How has the 'Covid-era experience' been for you, Iain, with its lockdowns, its 'new normals' and its various other challenges?

Covid has been a challenge. I lost all the work in my studio during the first lockdown and also all my writing and performing work. The theatre and TV sector has really suffered and is still suffering. It was a joy to do the online panto, and I'm also about to film my Santa show for the pre-school audience. Santa's Christmas Rescue will hopefully be performed to socially distanced audiences at the Belgrade in December, but we also have a filmed version we can stream if the live performances are unable to take place.

What are the main reasons why audiences should check out Jack And The Beanstalk Online this Christmas?

Covid has written off most of our year. As we're speaking, we're in a second lockdown and still seem to be at the mercy of the virus. The positive thing about the lockdowns is that we all have a common experience of queues, lack of toilet roll, social distancing, online shopping, Zoom calls and all the rest - not to mention Joe Wicks! Well, we've included all these experiences in our online panto, and it makes for very funny viewing! So don't miss out on pantomime this year. Bring it into your own home and have a great experience with the family. I hope everyone enjoys it!

Jack And The Beanstalk is available to view online from Tuesday 1 to Thursday 31 December. For further information and to purchase tickets, visit belgrade.co.uk



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Show off your skills on the real-ice rink at
Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge.

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Coventry Glides

Coventry Cathedral, Fri 4 December - Sun 10 January

This 'magical winter wonderland experience' takes place in the historic setting of Coventry Cathedral and promises plenty of outdoor fun for household bubbles.

The ice-skating rink has been created in partnership with Coventry Business Improvement District (BID) and Coventry Cathedral, with support from Coventry City

Council. The rink has been planned with Covid safety measures very much in mind. These include timed slots for skaters, reduced skater capacity, mandatory face masks for all participants (except those who are exempt) and cleaning between skating sessions.

Book tickets at coventry2021.co.uk/what-s-on/coventry-glides



Warwick's Winter Wonderland

Warwick Castle, until Sun 17 January

Marvel at bedecked halls, listen to yuletide stories and check out a selection of family-friendly activities at Warwick Castle this Christmas. The venue's popular ice rink makes a welcome return too, while a new attraction for 2020 - a magical light trail - winds its way around the beautiful grounds and gardens, telling a story of hope... Christmas treats, together with festive food & drink, will be available to purchase from the huts surrounding the ice rink.

Book tickets at warwickcastle.com

Luminate Light Trail

Coombe Abbey Country Park, Sun 20 January - Thurs 21 February

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**



Christmas Adventure Quest

Kenilworth Castle & Elizabethan Garden, Warwickshire, Sat 26 December - Sun 3 January

English Heritage's festive adventure quest offers families the chance to discover 'fun facts and untold stories in the places where history happened'. Hunt for clues and QR codes which reveal quirky tales, or treat yourself to a hot chocolate or mulled wine in beautiful surroundings. It's a great way for the whole family to get out and about this Christmas.

Book tickets at english-heritage.org.uk



Jewellery Quarter

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CHRISTMAS 2020



Experience the magic of a JQ Christmas from home!
Browse the festive window displays online and plan
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Plus, vote for your favourite for a chance to win!

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jewelleryquarter.net/jq-christmas



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BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT



Christmas At Blists Hill

Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge, Shropshire, various dates throughout December

The award-winning Blists Hill Victorian Town has pulled out all the stops to ensure its visitors have a Covid-safe Christmas to remember. The popular tourist destination is hosting two special Christmas weekends, featuring brass bands, carol singers, a Victorian Christmas shopping emporium, pantomime and performances. There will also be a range of themed activities to enjoy, Christmas card and

decoration making, as well as falling snow to add to the festive atmosphere.

A new addition for 2020 is the town's ice rink, where people both young and not so young can show off their skating skills.

Time slots will be available and an additional charge applies.

A new grotto has also been added to the Victorian town - so make sure you visit Father Christmas as he prepares for his busiest day of the year. His trusted elves will be handing out presents to all visiting children.

Book at ironbridge.co.uk

Steam In Lights

Severn Valley Railway, Bridgnorth, Shropshire, 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**



Christmas At The Castle

Hartlebury Castle, Worcestershire, Sat 5 & Sun 6 December

As well as seeing the castle decked in all its festive glory, visitors to this weekend-long event can also meet Father Christmas in the castle's old kitchen, see Mrs Christmas going about her festive chores, and follow the Christmas Elf Trail, picking up clues along the way.

Festive wreaths - made by Hartlebury's gardeners - and a plethora of edible delights will also be on offer. **Book tickets at hartleburycastle.com**



Malvern Winter Glow

Three Counties Showground, Malvern, Worcestershire, Wed 9 December - Sun 3 January

This new outdoor illuminations trail features dramatic light installations inspired by the area's natural landscape, history and heritage.

The mile-long trail takes in a mixed terrain, so appropriate footwear is essential.

And what better accompaniment can there be on your walk than a mug of festive cheer from one of the onsite vendors selling a range of seasonal food & drink.

Book at threecounties.org.uk/whatson/malvern-winter-glow/



CHRISTMAS AT THE CASTLE



Experience the ultimate winter wonderland this festive season

5th December 2020 to 17th January 2021

- ✦ Ice Skating beneath the spectacular castle backdrop
- ✦ Brand new light trail for 2020
- ✦ Delicious seasonal treats at our festive market stalls!



Book now: warwick-castle.com

*On selected dates, limited availability





A Magical Christmas Cracker

National Forest Adventure Farm,
Burton-upon-Trent, various dates in
December

This brand-new family adventure takes place outdoors but under cover. A packed programme of festive fun on the farm includes two 20-minute interactive shows: The Night Before Christmas - where every child comes away with a gift - and Charlie's Reindeer Adventure, complete with a personal message for each young visitor.

A Snowmen Hall Of Fame tractor ride, reindeer carousel and gingerbread-decorating activities are also available to enjoy.

Each visitor will receive a complimentary hot chocolate or mulled wine, too. Bargain!

Book at adventurefarm.co.uk

SANTA TRAINS

STEAM INTO A WINTER WONDERLAND

A green steam locomotive with a red bow and a wreath on its front is pulling a brown passenger carriage. Santa Claus is waving from the front of the carriage. The train is on a snowy track with mountains in the background.

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GETTING YOUR FESTIVE FIX IN A CAR PARK...

Birmingham Stage Company are back on the road with hit festive production Horrible Christmas - and this time, they're swapping grand theatres for drive-ins...

Airports, showgrounds, racecourses and arenas will be the new home of the Horrible Histories' Christmas show for the next two months, as audience members marvel at Car Park Panto from the comfort of their vehicles.

Steeped in humour, history and heartfelt moments, Horrible Christmas takes a trip through the roots of Christmas as we know it. "This is quite different to a lot of the Horrible Histories shows that we do," explains Neal Foster, performer and manager at Birmingham Stage Company, which has been bringing Horrible Histories to the stage for

the past 15 years. "It's a story written by Terry Deary, who's also written all of the books, and it tells the tale of a bad Santa who wants to destroy Christmas because he hates it. He does so by going back to all the pivotal moments in history that made Christmas as we know it today and trying to change them: he tries to stop Charles Dickens writing A Christmas Carol, Henry VIII from having a turkey and the Nativity from happening at all. He tries to help Oliver Cromwell ban Christmas and steals the first ever Christmas present given by St Nicholas. However, one

young child - who gets all his presents stolen by this Santa - teams up with Shirley Holmes to try and stop Christmas being cancelled.

"Horrible Christmas has songs and audience interaction. Although it isn't a panto - in the sense that there's a Dame and it's a classic fairytale story - there are definitely some similarities. It's funny, it's silly, and, unusually for a Horrible Histories story, it's actually quite moving at the end as well, which is what makes it such a perfect show for the festive season. It's a journey through all of the most important moments in

Christmas. Christmas in this century is not what it's always been like, and throughout history there have been other instances where Christmas was under threat - and that's very apt for the scenarios we're facing right now, I think. This is a play about how one boy saves Christmas for the whole world."

The Horrible Histories books and productions are greatly admired for the way in which they combine education and entertainment. Neal continues: "John Cleese made a very good point, that making people laugh means they've understood what you've told them. To make people laugh is a great way of teaching, as your audience has to get the joke in the first place. Terry Deary completely tapped into that in the whole foundation of Horrible Histories. In making jokes, silliness and fun out of history, you force your reader or audience to have some level of understanding. Therefore, entertainment is a fantastic way of educating. Obviously we're not educating to help people pass exams; our motivation is more about helping people gain a better connection to the world around them. It's about enriching the experience of life. The more you know about what's going on, the more interesting and enjoyable living is."

Projected on the big screen, Car Park Panto is an inventive, Covid-safe way of keeping theatre alive for families this Christmas. "The main challenge has been that because of the staging there isn't as much set as we would usually have, but it will still look very pretty and Christmassy for our audiences," says Neal. "We've also made it shorter, as there's no interval - everyone stays in their cars - so it will run at just over an hour. Apart from that, though, there are very few changes. We've been doing this show for eight years all over the country, so it's almost the exact same production whether we're performing to filled theatres or full cars. That's the beauty of it."

The sound is delivered both from the stage and via FM, so people can listen on their car radios with the windows closed. But what does that mean for the relationship between performer and audience member?

"The great advantage to us on this tour is that we already did drive-in events for our other Horrible Histories show, Barmy Britain, over the summer, so we've learnt a lot about how to make them work. One of the biggest ways the audience can interact with us is they can beep their car horns at us, or flash their lights, use hazards. It is a strange experience because we don't get all that floor laughter that we usually would through the

show, but we do still get a response from the audience. It becomes a sort of self-contained performance, so it's even more important that the actors are enjoying themselves and are able to communicate that to the audience. Another real advantage we have is that, knowing the show so well, we can pause where we know the laughs come. Even though we don't hear them, we'll still leave a gap for people to laugh in their car; otherwise people would force themselves to stop laughing through fear of missing something.

"It's a very different experience as an actor, but we had a fantastic response from audience members to Barmy Britain, including those who've seen the show on tour before or in the West End. People get a fantastic view of the actors on the big screen, and the sound quality is perfect. In many ways, doing the drive-in style for a kids' show also has its advantages. Sitting in the car, parents are less worried about keeping their children quiet and still - not rustling sweet packets, shouting out, talking to each other and so on. There's always that pressure to keep quiet in a theatre audience, but this feels like viewing from the comfort of home."

Since its foundation, and with Neal at the helm, Birmingham Stage Company has presented over 80 productions and become one of the world's leading producers of theatre for children and their families.

"For the first part of our life at Birmingham Stage Company, we also did a lot of adult theatre. But at some stage I realised that, if we concentrated on children's shows, we could become one of the top companies in the world in that speciality. Focusing on family theatre meant that we could get hold of work like premiering adaptations of David Walliams' children's books and bringing Horrible Histories to life, which is the most successful non-fiction in the world. This is as big as it gets! Another part of the motivation to continue down that path is that I've always had a great rapport with children. You build a relationship between actor and child, where they're astonished that the actor is talking directly to them, that they're involved, and continually invited to participate. That whole theatrical relationship is so fascinating.

"Children are also much more sophisticated than we ever give them credit for, and they never cease to surprise you with how much they understand and how engrossed they are in the show. The type of engagement in a children's show is slightly different to that of an adult, as adults tend to sit back and let you get on with the work, whilst children are with you every step of the way. It's a great

challenge to keep them interested, but I don't believe in the mantra that children can't concentrate on things. Horrible Histories and our other family offerings have proved otherwise. I've watched children glued to every movement we make and hanging on every word we say, and that's very special. It's also difficult, but that's what makes it so exciting. You know that if a child leaves having really enjoyed the show, they'll probably be talking about it for the days and weeks to come, asking questions about things that happened and wanting to find out more. To have that effect on another human being through theatre is so satisfying."

Despite the uncertain year, Neal is feeling positive about the future: "We've got two brand-new Horrible Histories shows for next year, and I've also written a third one over lockdown. We're also working on a brand-new David Walliams production. So there's a lot in the pipeline! We're excited for this awful period to be over, and to get back to filling theatres again like we were at our best. We want to make sure that we can celebrate our 30th anniversary in 2022, especially with what's going on at the moment. Birmingham Stage Company has done something wonderful every year since it was founded, whether that be performing on Broadway with our production of Skellig, taking Horrible Histories to Sydney Opera House, or working with David Walliams and Terry Deary.

"Every single year has been no different. Surprisingly, that even includes 2020, as we managed to keep going with our events and take Barmy Britain down to the Minack in Cornwall, which is the most beautiful open-air theatre right on the coast, with waves crashing over the stage as we're performing. Birmingham Stage Company has given me the life I wanted: a life in theatre and full of opportunity all over the world, from Singapore to Hong Kong, Dubai, Qatar, Syria, and New York - you name it. We also had the privilege of having The Old Rep in Birmingham as our home for 23 years. We started in that little theatre on Station Street, and got all the way here based solely on ticket sales rather than funding. We're very grateful for the grant we just received to help us on our way this year, and this is still an adventure of a lifetime that I'm very determined won't end."

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Horrible Christmas visits Ricoh Arena, Coventry, on Tuesday 15 December, and Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, on Saturday 2 & Sunday 3 January.

Festive film

We reckon there's nothing nicer at Christmas than settling down in front of the TV to catch up with our favourite festive films, while maybe dipping into the Quality Street at the same time - assuming there are

any left, of course! We thought we'd check in with some of our Midlands-based friends to find out which Christmas movie they love the most. We hope you enjoy their responses as much as we have. Happy viewing!



White Christmas

"My favourite Christmas film has to be the old faithful, White Christmas. It came out in 1954, well before my family had a television, but I do remember some years later watching it for the first time with my parents. They'd seen it in the cinema and absolutely loved it. They were huge fans of Bing Crosby - that amazing, rich voice. The title song to me somehow

epitomises the essence of Christmas; the Christmas song of all Christmas songs. Every time I hear it, I just have to stop and reflect. It evokes such warm, cherished childhood memories. My parents would just look at each other when the song came on and say in unison, 'Ah, Bing. All is well.'"

Nick Owen: Presenter of
BBC Midlands Today

favourites



Fiona Allan:
Artistic Director and
Chief Executive of
Birmingham
Hippodrome



Monty Python's The Life Of Brian

"Perhaps not a classic festive film, but every year in the lead-up to Christmas, I have a night watching The Life Of Brian. In my mind the greatest of the Monty Python films, its

cheeky satire never fails to have me in stitches, and this year especially we all need a big laugh. Just remember 'He's not the Messiah - he's a very naughty boy!'"

Mary Poppins

"During the Christmas period, I traditionally watch Mary Poppins. As a child, my parents took me to the cinema to see this film, and to this day Feed The Birds is my all-time favourite song. The 'bird lady' featured in the song had very little



herself, yet she still thinks of others before herself. The lyrics are so poignant:

*"Early each day to the steps of Saint Paul's
The little old bird woman comes
In her own special way to the people
She calls, "Come, buy my bags full of crumbs.
"Come feed the little birds, show them you care
And you'll be glad if you do
Their young ones are hungry, their nests are so bare,
All it takes is tuppence from you..."*

It's a song about charity, giving and kindness, something I have grown with and still prioritise today. When I was a presenter at Saga Radio, I was very fortunate to interview the composer of Mary Poppins, Richard Sherman, and I asked him if he had a favourite song. It was also Feed The Birds. He shared with me that it was also Walt Disney's favourite song, and every Friday afternoon before he left his office with his brother, Robert, Walt would say to the Sherman brothers, 'Play it again, boys.' What a great legacy!"



Adrian Jackson:
CEO and Artistic
Director of
Wolverhampton
Grand Theatre

Festive film favourites



Dan Whitehouse:
Wolverhampton-born
musician

The Snowman (1982)

"The Snowman reminds me of my grandparents' council house on Finchale Road in Hebburn, on the south bank of the river Tyne, in the North East. Adults sat on the sofa with orange cans of Stones' lager, with my sister and I lying on the carpet watching the TV. The carpet was thicker than ours, and it felt so luxurious and warm to roll around in and push my fingers through; I'd fall asleep in front of the telly and loved the feel of it on my cheek. My grandparents also had a life-size, long-haired old English sheepdog soft toy. So it was touch sensory overload! We had fun riding him around the lounge and up and down the stairs. I watched The Snowman every year and never got over it - it's so sad! But I liked it because my mom would cry too, and then she'd give me the biggest hug at the end. I knew if I could sit the film out, I'd get this extra-special cuddle, so it was worth it. The song, Walking In The Air, is so evocative, and my mom is in the room with me whenever I hear that piece of music."



Planes, Trains And Automobiles

"This film by John Hughes is actually set around Thanksgiving and follows one man's journey in trying to get home for the holidays. His travels are filled with near-death experiences, explosions, punches to the face and 'that' scene with the shared bed and the pillow. I could watch this film over and over

- in fact, any film starring the late, great John Candy would be a Christmas classic in my eyes. I was just 12 when it came out and remember laughing so hard when John Candy fell asleep at the wheel that I couldn't breathe. My three boys had the same reaction when we watched it together over 30 years later."



Brad Pitt: Actor, director,
producer - and Theatre
Severn's favourite Dame



Carlos Acosta: Director of
Birmingham Royal Ballet

Home Alone



"Christmas was a late addition to my life. Growing up in Cuba, we had no celebrations at this time of year at all, so I have no childhood memories or traditions to relate to, as others have. But after living so many years abroad, it has become a big part of my life - and especially since having children and being part of an extended English family. I would have to say Home Alone is my favourite. I think because of not having had Christmas as a child, I love the little boy and can relate to his feelings of abandonment and vulnerability, and how he manages to triumph despite everything. He is very cheeky, which is just how I was too. It is a sweet, funny, feelgood movie, and just hearing the music gets me in the mood for Christmas. My eldest daughter is now at the age where we can watch it together, so that makes me happy."



Mrs Barbara Nice
(aka Janice Connolly):
Comedian and actress

The Wizard Of Oz

"It's always hard as a mother to name a favourite, as it's not nice for the others to know they're not number one, but I'm going to choose The Wizard Of Oz. It's got everything, from turning from black & white to technicolour, to witches and flying monkeys. I love the songs and I love the characters,

especially the Cowardly Lion. Like Dorothy, I yearned as a kid to go over the rainbow, 'where problems melt like lemon drops', only to learn in the end the good old lesson that 'there's no place like home'. Which has never been truer than in 2020 - the Year of the Home."



Theresa Heskins: New Vic Theatre's Artistic Director

"On Christmas Day we'd all go to Nanny Kakala's. She lived in a little one-bedroom council house, and suddenly there were 11 of us plus the dog, talking over each other, running about, playing with our Christmas toys, searching for batteries, arguing over which channel the telly should be on, knocking over the tree and yapping (that was the dog!). By the afternoon everyone was exhausted, and we could watch the afternoon film in (semi) quiet. I remember first seeing The Wizard Of Oz in this way - and being blown away by it.

The songs, the story of the little girl desperately trying to get home, the little dog, the lovely framing device where the people from the Kansas farm all turn up as different characters in Oz. It was only many years later that I realised I'd fallen in love with it without ever knowing the really big thing about it. On Nan's little black & white telly from Radio Rentals, I had no idea that Dorothy's monochrome Kansas blossoms into a technicolour land of Oz!"

Festive film favourites



Doreen Tipton:
Panto star and Lazy Cow

The Railway Children

"Just because you're brought up in poverty, it doesn't mean you can't be a happy, loving family. Family values have always been very important to me. There's nothing I used to like more than just a quiet night in, gathered round the 60-inch plasma with my daughters, Trojan, Tangerine and Troll, watching my favourite film, The Railway Kids. In so many ways, The Railway Kids remind me of us. They were poor as well, having to make do with hand-me-downs, just like the old i-Phones my kids have got. And the father, he was also absent, just like here. In prison. Though in the film I think he was innocent.

I don't think I've ever watched that film and not cried at the scene at the end, where the dad comes back from prison on the steam train and the eldest kid shouts: "Daddy! My daddy!"

It gets me every time. Mind you, if that

happened to us, it would probably be a bit different. Our Trojan would probably catch sight of him through the steam and say, 'Who the hell's that bloke?'"



It's A Wonderful Life



"The story of George Bailey, played beautifully by James Stewart, is one of someone who's ground down by life, and by the choices he's made. A man who gave up his dreams to help others, he feels disappointed in himself and his small-town job. When a financial crisis comes around Christmas - there's a run on the small family bank he runs - he decides to kill himself, only to be saved by his 'guardian angel', who then shows him his life in a new light - how the world would be if he'd never been born, and how deeply he's touched the lives of others. Probably many other people's favourite Christmas film, It's A Wonderful Life is an amazing, uplifting experience that has me sobbing every time I watch it. And I watch it every year."



Sean Foley:
Artistic Director at
Birmingham Repertory
Theatre



Hamish Glen:
Artistic Director at Coventry's
Belgrade Theatre

Dinner For One

"My festive favourite is a short film called Dinner For One. Although almost unknown to British audiences, it's become a tradition in Germany and is broadcast annually across Northern Europe.

It begins with Miss Sophie (May Warden) inviting her four closest friends to her 90th birthday. Unfortunately, since she's outlived them all, her butler James (Freddie Flinton) has to impersonate the guests, while serving a four-course meal and drinks. James' intoxication from drinking their toasts results in a classic sketch with running gags and slapstick delivered with superb timing. Since adopting two children, I've been able to re-introduce this classic comedy into my family's festive rituals."



Festive film favourites



Love Actually

"Who doesn't love a Christmas film?! In a normal year, Christmas is by far my busiest time of the year as a restaurateur, so when I lock the doors of the restaurant on Christmas Eve and step away from the tired, sweaty, hairy chefs in the hot kitchen, I love nothing more than going home and putting on a Christmas film. If I had to choose a favourite scene in Love Actually, it would have to be the famous

airport scene, where Sam dodges past all the security guards to go and tell his classmate how he feels about her. Every film needs a good airport chase, right?! But other scenes are close contenders, like Hugh Grant's dancing and the Nativity scene at the primary school, where Spider-Man, several lobsters and a giant whale were all present at the birth of Jesus!"



Glynn Purnell:
Chef, restaurateur
and TV star



Shazia Mirza:
Comedian

Educating Rita

"Every year, I watch Educating Rita. It was a groundbreaking film. Funny, moving, true and inspiring. Michael Caine and Julie Walters are funny, serious, interesting and mad. I love the scene where Frank comes home to find Brian talking on his phone again, talking to his publisher, but Frank informs him that 'the phone was disconnected this morning'. Julia then tells him she's leaving him to go with Brian. It's funny and sad at the same time. It's a film about everything - class, love, dreams and life - and it makes you feel like everything is possible. It made me believe I could be like Julie Walters."



The Muppet Christmas Carol

"My favourite festive film has got to be The Muppet Christmas Carol! It's so funny! Rizzo the Rat is just comedy gold, plus I love all the songs in it. In fact, everyone needs a muppet in their life - I have my panto partner, Christian (Patterson)!"



Jonathan Wilkes:
Panto star

A Christmas Carol

A new film adaptation of Charles Dickens' most famous Christmas story is showing at cinemas and theatres across the Midlands in December...

A theatrically inspired film adaptation of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol is showing in cinemas and selected theatres during December. Produced by BAFTA-nominated filmmaking siblings Jacqui and David Morris, the film takes a beloved story and gives it a highly innovative treatment.

The on-screen characters are portrayed by dancers but voiced by a cast of famous actors, including Martin Freeman, Carey Mulligan, Daniel Kaluuya, Andy Serkis and Simon Russell Beale. Vicky Price recently caught up with Jacqui and David to find out more...

There have been countless adaptations of A Christmas Carol - so what makes this version unique?

The story is one of the best known in the world. It's never been out of print, and a version of A Christmas Carol was one of the first silent films ever made. It struck a chord from the beginning and is in the DNA of the season. The work has become synonymous with the Christmas spirit. As Scrooge says: "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and keep it all year. I will live in the past, the present and the future."

In 2018, we decided to make our own version. But how to make ours stand out? Firstly, we wanted to show the complete story, every scene in the book. This, as far as we can tell, has never been done before in a film. The practical reason for this omission is that some of the scenes are simply descriptions of events, with no characters speaking. This is difficult to portray in a conventional film that only uses Dickens' dialogue. But early on in the process, we decided to use the concept of a grandmother - played beautifully by Sian Phillips - narrating the story to her family during their annual retelling, using a toy theatre. In this way, she was able to read the author's own words when he depicts these difficult-to-film scenes.

How did you arrive at the decision to use contemporary dance to interpret the story?

We had had our eyes opened to dance and its possibilities when we made our documentary about Russian ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. In that film, we used contemporary dance to illustrate the early parts of Nureyev's life, where there was no

archive footage available. Our first thought had been to go down the conventional documentary route of using actors, but soon the idea came to us to use dancers. We believed that it would both be original and in keeping with the spirit of the story we wanted to tell.

After that, we thought that it would be a shame not to utilise the great team we had assembled for another project. We understood its potential, and believed that the principles we'd established could hold true when used on a grander scale. Russell Maliphant's choreography is famed for flow and fluidity. The movement on screen gels beautifully with the spoken word.

How do you think audiences will react to the film?

We believe people of all ages will love it. Dance enthusiasts have been very supportive. They appreciate the artistry of the choreography and the great talent of the dancers.

We've done extensive audience research and found that children respond wonderfully to it as well. They love Dickens' story but also the theatricality of the film - the colourful sets and melding of well-known actors' voices with corresponding dancers.

Although many people are initially a little puzzled at the idea of having two artists - dancer and voice actor - playing the same character, it's been widely praised for its originality and the fact that it works brilliantly as a piece of emotional drama.

Was the film originally planned just for cinema release, or did you always see it in a theatre setting as well?

The initial idea had been only to show the

film in cinemas. It never occurred to us that it would be suitable for live-theatre venues. After all, Christmas is their busiest time, what with pantomimes and their own versions of A Christmas Carol. But then Covid came along, and it became practically impossible for theatres to risk putting on expensive productions.

We approached theatres because we thought that our production was very like a theatrical production and would suit their venues. And we're pleased that many have taken up our offer. We're delighted to help out and bring the worlds of film and theatre together in this way.

What are the biggest challenges of being a brother & sister production team?

There are obvious challenges when siblings work together! It's easier to stand your ground and fight for an idea you believe in - sometimes to the point of rowing - with someone you've known all of your life, because you know that you'll always make up. That's not always the case with creative partners who are not so close.

Also, you trust the other person, and even if not always agreeing, you'll give one another a fair hearing.

A Christmas Carol shows at cinemas across the West Midlands from 4 December. You can also catch it at Wolverhampton's Grand Theatre on Tuesday 22 & Wednesday 23 December.



ILLUMINATING LICHFIELD

A light & sound spectacle that's fast becoming a festive-season tradition, The Cathedral Illuminated will this year once again be lighting up Lichfield Cathedral with images that reflect the very essence of Christmas. What's On chats to artist Peter Walker, a member of Luxmuralis, the artistic collaboration responsible for the stunning presentation ...

"The illuminations have definitely become a very important part of the festive calendar, and in fact one of the major events of the whole year here in Lichfield," explains Peter Walker, in talking about light & sound installation The Cathedral Illuminated. Peter is a member of Luxmuralis, the artistic collaboration which curates the installation. The illuminations see sounds and images connected to Christmas being projected onto the walls of Lichfield Cathedral. "The installation attracts thousands of people to the city, and we had people asking

us months ago about tickets for the event. I live in Lichfield myself, and one of the main motivations for the close relationship between Luxmuralis and Lichfield Cathedral is to bring art you see in the main cities in the UK, Europe and America, home to where we live and work. And fortunately the public here have embraced us! The people of Lichfield are really proud of the illuminations because they've really put the city on the map. It's a huge moment in the cathedral's annual programme and, as artists, it's fantastic to create something for Lichfield

each year.

"We've managed to figure out a way to put the show on safely this year, whilst making sure it's just as impressive as usual. What we've done in previous years is have projections at different parts of the cathedral - but to make it safe this year, to allow people onto the site and to have as much space as possible, we're primarily using the front of the cathedral. We're giving people a much longer show on the western front - up from 10 minutes to 20 minutes - to encompass everything they would usually see at the

different sites. We've also developed a strict one-way system to arrive into and exit the close too, and there's a greater gap between shows. We've checked with some recent guidelines received, and they suggest we're already doing everything to stay Covid-safe. Unless the more severe restrictions in place from November into very early December are extended, then we're fairly confident that we will be able to give people a really beautiful and uplifting experience just before Christmas. We've also reduced the price this year to reflect the difficult economic situation the pandemic has posed, and to make the event more accessible."

As well as hopefully inspiring some real and much-needed festive cheer - and, of course, celebrating the Nativity - this year's display also marks the 150th anniversary of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

"We try to change things up every year," says Peter, "but we always have the Nativity at the centre of things, and also a more contemporary festive element that depicts a more recent view of Christmas. There's usually a third, unique element thrown in. Last year we did the stained-glass windows of Notre Dame, and this year we're working with the Dickens Museum London to honour A Christmas Carol. We've used original images and beautiful illustrations from the first edition of the book to create that first part of the projection."

With images and videos of The Cathedral Illuminated shared across the world, this year's installation will be truly global.

"The impact of The Cathedral Illuminated goes beyond the people who get tickets and actually come to the event. We find that footage and images of it are very popular online too, and have reached far beyond the UK. A new partnership between Lichfield Cathedral and the Cathedral of St Paul in Minnesota has been formed this year, which actually came about through some other work I've been doing. It's a very important American National Cathedral in Minneapolis, which was the city at the centre of the tragic circumstances that accelerated the Black Lives Matter movement earlier this year. The idea was to create something joyous to be shared simultaneously across the two cities - so the same show will also be there this Christmas. As far as I know, it's the first time the same artwork will be shown not only on two different buildings, but on two different continents during the same period."

Both Peter as a fine artist and sculptor, and Luxmuralis as a company, are motivated by bringing contemporary art to new spaces.

Their installations have moved and inspired viewers across the UK.

"Luxmuralis is two artists: myself - doing the visual work - and composer David Harper, who produces bespoke accompaniment for the illuminations. But the company also includes all the technicians, anthropologists, logistics people and project managers who bring everything to fruition. As artists, we have such a great support team for the work we do, not only in the UK but abroad as well. I see the projection and illuminations not so much as a departure from my fine art painting and sculpture, but almost as a series to curate. So when we take amazing content and great stories, like Charles Dickens for example, that automatically gives you so much inspiration. We also draw on current events and other things going on around us to shape the narrative and direction of the art, so that it reflects what we feel, think, hear and see.

"We see cathedrals as more traditional in the sense that they contain quite a lot of older artwork and architecture, and they certainly don't have much that's contemporary in them. It's very difficult to put contemporary artwork into places like cathedrals on a permanent basis because of the protection of the building and its history. But the way that we've developed projections and curated light & sound shows is in a contemporary context, to reflect both what's going on in society and the rise of different art forms. It's very important to be able to put these in places where we have traditionally collected as communities to view and experience artwork. At Luxmuralis we also like to bring art right onto the streets and into communities, so we do something called light tagging, where we project light as though it's graffiti. We always try to take our art into different spaces and project in or onto different buildings, so that we can make our art as accessible as possible - both geographically and in the sense that we bring it into the context of our audience and their lives, homes and communities."

Hope, optimism and innovation are the name of the game for Peter, Luxmuralis and the wider visual arts sector going forward...

"I think the Arts Council has been fantastic, and its funding has supported venues, individuals and projects to continue to find new ways to create engagement in 2020. The appetite from the public for the arts is certainly undiminished, which is incredible. Even though we've unfortunately had to cancel a few things this year, the demand for the arts was certainly there in our ticket

sales. It's remarkable! Once we're allowed to do things more freely moving forward into next year, I firmly believe there will be more art produced to really help people through. Creativity is such an important part of people's lives. Art and creative outlets are uplifting and hopeful. The great thing with the arts is that they can touch any part of the human experience: a concert can take you out of yourself; you can go into a museum and be intellectually stimulated; people come to big events like ours and have a joyous experience. If we just look at how the public has responded to creative work during lockdown - where people just want to be drawing, writing, painting, sewing or taking photographs at home - it really shows that undertaking and experiencing creativity has been blossoming and will continue to do so.

"The fact that The Cathedral Illuminated has won the What's On Readers' Award for Best Event in Staffordshire four years running proves just how much art can be integrated into communities. Curating art in the right way and using the right subjects really appeals to the public, and they keep coming back for more. I'm only encouraged by the hunger I've seen from audiences this year, and I'm sure that will continue going forward. This is fine art work - the kind that you would see equivalents of in prestigious buildings around the world - brought straight into Lichfield. Lichfield Cathedral continues to have a really vibrant and engaging programme of events, and Luxmuralis is heavily involved in that. We'll see The Great Exhibition return in 2021, which is another of our sell-out summer light & sound events at the cathedral, and lots of other exhibitions and events throughout the year. Unfortunately we had to cancel our Poppy Fields remembrance event this year, but we're hoping we can reschedule that for next year. My Luxmuralis team is already completely booked out for the whole of next year, and we're having so many people approach us - especially, I think, because we're very adaptable to outdoor spaces. The next few years provide such an opportunity for people to be able to embrace the arts: staying safe whilst experiencing incredible fine art, music and more. I think we will see a stronger arts scene across all disciplines over the coming years."

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The Cathedral Illuminated: The Manger shows at Lichfield Cathedral
For further information and to book tickets, visit lichfield-cathedral.org

TALES FOR WINTER

The Royal Shakespeare Company's upcoming programme sees audiences invited into its main theatre for the first time since March



Going back to the roots of theatre - a great story - the RSC's Tales For Winter promises a mixture of live streams and socially distanced events, epic tales of the classical era and magical musical offerings. We caught up with the Company's artistic director, Gregory Doran, to find out more about the theatre's long-awaited 'return to business'...

"We've been waiting so long for theatres to start presenting stuff again," says RSC Artistic Director Gregory Doran. "It was great in the summer when we were able to put on Shakespeare's Snapshots in the gardens, and we had such a fantastic response to that. Because we'd been doing so much online in 2020, we wanted to make sure that, at the end of this year, we had something in the theatre. We had a programme ready to go, and then the new lockdown was imposed, so we had to change our thinking a little bit. We had to adapt very, very quickly to the new lockdown. The Tales For Winter programme takes its name from the play we were meant to be opening our season with: Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale. But its premise is to go right back to the very start of our theatre making, which is performers standing up in front of a group of people and telling them a story. If you can grab an audience with a single voice telling a story, then you can do anything."

The programme kicks off with the return of The Boy In The Dress...

"David Walliams was supposed to be live in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre for the launch of The Boy In The Dress cast recording, but now that will be online," Gregory explains. "David will be reading a bit of the book, and we will launch the soundtrack with special guests including Guy Chambers, who wrote the music with Robbie Williams, and cast members. This has been long-awaited, and since the musical was supposed to be in the West End at the moment, it was even more important that we made this happen. There's a bitter-sweet element to it as well. We're opening the Tales For Winter programme with a signal of where we left off when we went into our first lockdown. If you go into the Royal Shakespeare Theatre now, the wings and changing rooms are filled with the costumes, set, and chairs with the cast names from The Boy In The Dress - ready to go for its run at the Savoy Theatre, London. We're remembering what a great show it is, and what fantastic musical numbers feature. It's a sad sense of both remembering where we were when we had to close, and pushing forward to where we hope to be in the near future."

“It’s a sad sense of both remembering where we were when we had to close, and pushing forward to where we hope to be in the near future.”

Gregory is directing a proportion of the programme himself: Troy Story is a five-installment live stream retelling the fall of Troy and all that came both before and after.

"Following on from that premise of storytelling inspiring the programme, we're going back to the very beginning of stories in Europe and basing Troy Story on Greek classics The Iliad and The Odyssey, and Latin epic The Aeneid. We're going to stream it over the whole day, and the entire RSC acting company are going to be in that. We're taking all different parts of the story, from the wooden horse and the end of the Trojan War, to the rage of Achilles, the murder of Hector, and the people's journeys afterwards - whether that be Aeneas fleeing to Italy, or Odysseus trying to get home to Ithica. It's an incredible, epic tale over a five-hour stream. Also, I haven't yet directed this particular RSC acting company. They're such a talented bunch, who've been with us through thick and thin the last few months. It's fantastic to be able to be with them for their first outing on the Royal Shakespeare Theatre stage - albeit socially distanced - to tell a story that's been part of our cultural heritage for two-and-a-half millennium."

The winter programme also includes a Christmas treat: Festive Tales will be presented to a live, reduced-capacity audience.

"Normally at this time of year, we would do a carol concert for ourselves, but that can't happen in 2020, so we thought we would move it onto the stage and share our yearly tradition with the wider RSC community, who we've engaged with so much since March. There will also be a carousel outside the theatre, and some fire bowls, so that there can be some more adhoc storytelling alongside the carols. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre seats around 1,000, but we'll have to cut that down to 200 for appropriate social distancing. But getting audiences back in the theatre is going to be an incredibly moving moment for everyone - the performers, the audience, and us as a whole company."

Looking forward to early 2021, the RSC will present a week of live streamed performances inspired by bestselling author Michael Morpurgo's new book, Tales From Shakespeare. Offerings include Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo And Juliet.



"It's fantastic that Michael Morpurgo himself will be part of the festival. I had a conversation with Michael about three years ago, about whether he'd consider rewriting Tales From Shakespeare, so I'm really thrilled that he's done it and that we have the honour of premiering them. Michael was the Children's Laureate and obviously much-loved by schools and families. He doesn't actually publish them until next year, but still he'll be reading some of them. He's written 10, and we're presenting six of them at the moment - and hopefully the other four will follow shortly, too. Instead of performing them to a house of schools and family audiences, we'll be doing them online with our RSC acting company. The company will



The Royal Shakespeare Company's production of David Walliams's *The Boy In The Dress*

be reading them knowing that the intended audience is primary school children. They are incredible tales in the way that he's rewritten the plays in a very vivid and contemporary way. We're so excited to be able to use these tales to help inspire a younger generation with Shakespeare."

The RSC's unavoidable focus on online content this year has revolutionised their work for the foreseeable future.

"So much has been going on over lockdown and beyond with our associate schools programme, with our regional theatre partners - lovely initiatives like Share Your Shakespeare. They will continue. We've been at the forefront of online work with schools over lockdown, helping drama teachers who've never had to conduct drama lessons on Zoom. We've been getting some of our freelancers and education practitioners to put their creative minds to that, and help in any way possible. The work we do outside of the performances has had time to grow and develop over this period, and it's been very necessary to do so for the community. I'm sure that will continue to develop.

"We've found a whole different life online, and different ways of keeping engagement with our international friends and stakeholders who won't be travelling any time soon. Our Talking Shakespeare programme in the summer had Judi Dench, David Tennant, Harriet Walter and Juliet Stevenson. The new series at the moment started with Ian McKellen, Helen Mirren and Roger Allam, and will soon be followed by David Oyelowo and Jane Lapotaire - so many great RSC actors entertaining us with stories of their careers and love of Shakespeare. We're also leading a fantastic initiative called Audiences Of The Future, and that's looking at really interesting ways of putting content online."

There will also be other changes going forward: "There's certainly been a lot of recalibration and rethinking going on here at the RSC; thinking about how we create and how we deliver. Our process of dealing with closure and opening again hasn't just been about restoration, but there's also an element of opportunity. We're reassessing who we are and what it is that we do. While this has obviously been a huge crisis, I think it has also posed great opportunities for us. Clearly, in the short term, closing the Swan Theatre and the Studio Theatre at The Other Place is devastating for us, but it's in order for us to



Gregory Doran

“ This period has made us realise how much we need the arts; how much we need theatre. It brings that sense of community, communion and congregation that we didn't really understand the value of until it was taken away. ”

come back stronger at a later date. I think with The Other Place, in particular, it's less about the bricks and mortar and more the spirit of the place that makes it so unique. We should have been in Tokyo with Taming Of The Shrew before the Olympics this year, and when talking to the British Council over there, they reminded us that the Olympic Torch is still alight. That became a really

powerful symbol for us, about how we need to keep our flame burning on - and the way to do that is to keep finding new writing, new platforms for underrepresented voices, and new digital solutions. We want to continue that radical spirit of The Other Place - invention, innovation, all things new. The same with the Swan Theatre - we want to make sure that we've had writers working on projects all this time."

Despite the challenges 2020 has posed, Gregory is confident about the RSC's future: "Post-Christmas we've got an amazing piece of work coming up that's a fusion of jazz and Shakespeare with Black performers. We're very excited about that, but we haven't announced it just yet. We wanted that to come before Christmas, but unfortunately we had to shift it back a little. Having audiences back is the most important thing and is what we're looking forward to most in the future. Our audiences are who we are. We are there to perform to people - Shakespeare primarily, and also other things - but without people to watch, we are nothing. We so wanted to be opening this winter with The Winter's Tale and Comedy Of Errors productions, which we had to postpone back in the spring when lockdown was announced, but we knew we simply couldn't do that just yet with the social distancing. We will, hopefully, be able to stage those in summer 2021, and then they'll be followed by fantastic family show The Magician's Elephant for the autumn and on through Christmas.

"This period has made us realise how much we need the arts; how much we need theatre. It brings that sense of community, communion and congregation that we didn't really understand the value of until it was taken away. We've never faced a crisis like this in the history of the RSC. In 140 years we've never missed a summer season - even when the theatre burnt down in 1926 - apart from maybe during the First World War. This is the first time in a very long time that we haven't been performing Shakespeare plays in the theatre in the summer, so we can't wait for that to happen again. There's a wonderful moment at the end of The Winter's Tale where a statue comes to life, and that image is going to be a really powerful one for us in 2021."

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For further details about the Tales For Winter programme, and to book tickets, visit: [rsc.org.uk](https://www.rsc.org.uk)

Returning to the stage...

Despite the stop-start conditions endured by theatres everywhere during 2020, there are still some Christmas crackers to be enjoyed if you're heading to London over the festive season.

Unsurprisingly, what's on offer is the ultimate compilation of Christmas pasts, family favourites, beloved classics and sure-fire hits that never fail to win over the chilliest of hearts.

And with experts forecasting 30 million fewer overseas visits to the UK in 2020, it's a unique time to be in London while supporting the people and places that make our live arts & entertainment industry the envy of the world.

Pick of the pantomimes

With the help of the National Lottery, the UK's biggest pantomime once again takes centre stage at the London Palladium. Boasting a line-up that includes Julian Clary, Elaine Page, Paul Zerdin, Gary Wilmot and Ashley Banjo, Pantoland will not be panto as we know it - but the laughs, magic and spectacle will be everything we've come to expect from the best panto in the land.

Book your tickets at palladiumpantomime.com

Across the river, at the National Theatre, there's pantomime in the shape of Dick Whittington. Performed in the round in a transformed Olivier theatre, the cries of 'he's behind you!' will echo round the hallowed walls for only the second time in history.

Book your tickets at nationaltheatre.org.uk

But why see just one pantomime when you can enjoy seven? Or at least some of their best bits. That's the premise of Potted Pantomime at the Garrick Theatre, a madcap ride of a show celebrating all that's crazily brilliant about this uniquely British family favourite.

Book your tickets at garricktheatre.org



Pictured (top to bottom): Pantoland at the London Palladium and Potted Pantomime at the Garrick Theatre

A Christmas cracker

Christmas in theatreland wouldn't be the same without The Nutcracker, and this year there are two sumptuous creations to savour.

At the Royal Opera House, the Royal Ballet present a re-staging of Sir Peter Wright's celebrated two-act production, featuring students of The Royal Ballet School alongside the full company. A delectable mix of old and new, the show features sumptuous costumes, glittering sets and of course spectacular dancing accompanied by Tchaikovsky's wondrous score.

Book your tickets at roh.org.uk

London's other resident company, English National Ballet, has been performing a version of The Nutcracker every year since 1950. In 2020, the tradition lives on with Nutcracker Delights at the London Coliseum. Another new Covid-safe staging, this collection of the ballet's most popular moments takes audiences on a magical hot-air balloon ride with Clara and her enchanted Nutcracker to the Land of Snow.

Book your tickets at londoncoliseum.org

Pictured: The Royal Ballet's Nutcracker



A dash of Dickens

Festive classics don't get more definitive than A Christmas Carol, and Charles Dickens' story, in all its various guises, has been another mainstay of the London stage. First presented just six weeks after publication in 1843, the work was regularly performed by Dickens himself, taking on the role of every character - without props or costumes - up until the year of his death in 1870.

Fast forward 150 years and one of the finest actors of his generation, Simon Russell Beale, is joined by Patsy Ferran and Eben Figueiredo in a new telling of A Christmas Carol at the Bridge Theatre. Expect something truly remarkable from one of London's most exciting theatre companies.

Book tickets at bridgetheatre.co.uk

Prefer your Dickens with a bit more razzmatazz? Then A Christmas Carol - The Musical Staged Concert, starring Brian Conley, is the show for you. Penned by legendary Disney composer Alan Menken (The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Beauty And The Beast), this often-performed version of the Broadway musical features Conley and an all-star West End cast accompanied by the fabulous 24-piece Theatre Orchestra at the Dominion Theatre.

Book tickets at londonboxoffice.co.uk



Pictured: A Christmas Carol - The Musical Staged Concert

Museum and Gallery Top Picks

Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder Of Nature

The Natural History Museum's hotly anticipated exhibition explores the links between animals of the natural world, mythical creatures and their fictional counterparts from JK Rowling's Wizarding World. By shining a light on creatures of the natural world that find themselves struggling for survival, the museum hopes to inspire us to better protect them in the future.

Book tickets at nhm.ac.uk

Antarctica 3D and Wonderlab: The Equinor Gallery

The Art Fund's Museum of the Year, the Science Museum has spent the last 10 months revamping its giant IMAX theatre. Now fitted with next-generation projection technology, the cinema is screening the awesome Antarctica 3D, narrated by Benedict Cumberbatch. If you've got kids, also take them to Wonderlab, the ultimate hands-on (and then some!) interactive gallery experience. **Book tickets at sciencemuseum.org.uk**



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Must see theatre coming up in 2021



The Da Vinci Code

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 26 - Sat 31 July; Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Mon 6 - Sat 11 September; The Alexandra, Birmingham, Mon 18 - Sat 23 October; Malvern Theatres, Mon 22 - Sat 27 November

Dan Brown's bestselling novel - written in 2003 and made into a blockbuster movie starring Tom Hanks in 2006 - sees cryptologists Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu grappling with a series of baffling codes found alongside the body of the brutally murdered curator of

the Louvre...

"I'm thrilled that The Da Vinci Code is being adapted for the stage," says Dan, "and excited to see the unique potential of live theatre enhance this story. The team making the production has been faithful to the book, but will also bring something new for the audience, in what's certain to be a gripping, fast-paced stage thriller and a thoroughly entertaining show." The production stops off at five Midlands theatres as part of a 31-venue UK tour.

Pericles

Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, date tbc

This rarely performed work is thought to have been a collaboration between Shakespeare and the dramatist & pamphleteer George Wilkins, with the Stratford bard having written just under half of its 1,662 lines.

Produced around 1608, it tells the story of the young Prince of Tyre, Pericles, who, fearing for his life, takes to the seas and finds himself embarking on a series of perilous adventures...

"The play echoes the many stories of displaced families struggling to escape oppression and forced to face the dangers of sea crossings in today's Mediterranean," says RSC Artistic Director Gregory Doran. "I'm very excited at the chance to reassess this timely play. It's over a decade since we produced Pericles and nearly 20 years since it was performed in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre."

Looking Dead Good

Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Mon 12 - Sat 17 April; Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Mon 10 - Sat 15 May; Malvern Theatres, 30 August - Sat 4 September; The Alexandra, Birmingham, Mon 6 - Sat 11 September



Bestselling crime writer Peter James has scored major successes on stage as well as in print, with adaptations of his books having played to appreciative audiences at venues across the UK. This latest offering features Detective Superintendent Roy Grace, the Brighton-based policeman who's headed up murder investigations in a number of James's most popular novels. On this occasion, Grace is called in when a man who finds a USB

memory stick on a train inadvertently becomes a witness to a vicious murder... EastEnders stalwart Adam Woodyatt (Ian Beale) stars.

The 39 Steps

Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham, Thurs 8 - Sat 17 April

Anybody who remembers the various film versions of John Buchan's classic spy thriller will be hard-pressed to call any of them 'humorous'. So it's a bit weird to think of this stage version bagging the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy. Nonetheless, that's exactly what it did, courtesy of some imaginative thinking on the part of its creative team.

So why not catch up with handsome hero Richard Hannay as he battles to remain impressively stiff-upper-lipped in the face of dastardly murders and life-threatening encounters with double-crossing secret agents... Four fearless actors play no fewer than 150 roles in this real gem of a show.

The Woman In Black

Malvern Theatres, Mon 11 - Sat 16 May



Adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from Susan Hill's same-titled novel, *The Woman In Black* is a classic ghost story first performed in 1989. It has since become one of the West End's most successful plays.

Solicitor Arthur Kipp believes that his family have somehow been cursed by a mysterious woman in black. In an attempt to tell his story, and to exorcise the evil curse which he's convinced hangs over him, he hires a young actor to assist him in recounting his experiences...

Jack The Ripper: Mary Kelly

Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham, Wed 14 - Sat 17 July

Of 11 murders which took place in the Whitechapel area of London between 1888

and 1891, five have been strongly linked to history's most famous unidentified serial killer - Jack The Ripper.

The fifth of those victims, who met her grizzly fate on 9 November 1888, was poverty-stricken prostitute Mary Jane Kelly - and it's through the telling of her life story that the gruesome tale of the Ripper is here recounted.

Expect a winning blend of 'naturalistic dialogue and fast-paced stylistic storytelling' interspersed with moments of brutal violence...

Absurd Person Singular

Malvern Theatres, Tues 29 June - Sat 3 July

Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular* charts the progress - and decline - of three couples in three kitchens during three Christmas gatherings, during which each couple gets more than they bargained for. One of the playwright's most pleasing comedies, it's an enduring piece which has lost none of its bite in the 48 years since it was premiered.

Beauty And The Beast

New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, dates tbc

Postponed from 2020 for obvious reasons, the New Vic's retelling of this classic fairytale sees the venue's artistic director, Theresa Heskins, bringing to bear all of her

trademark inventiveness to present a show that promises to breathe new life into an old fable. Heskins, whose previous triumphs have included the Olivier Award-winning *The Worst Witch*, has returned to the original versions of the tale for her much-anticipated adaptation. Expect a show replete with enchanting storytelling, an impressive score and a generous helping of family-friendly humour...

The Winter's Tale

Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, dates tbc

One of Shakespeare's later and lesser-known works, *The Winter's Tale* recounts the story of Perdita, who, after being lost at sea as a baby, is rescued and brought up by an old shepherd.

When she meets the king's son, Florizel, love blossoms amid the rustic revelry...

The production was originally scheduled for last summer, when it would have been presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company alongside new versions of *Pericles* (previewed above) and *The Comedy Of Errors*.

"The sea divides families in all three plays," says RSC Artistic Director Gregory Doran.

"Themes of separation & loss and the restorative power of time connect all three of them. Each play is wonderfully different, yet at the same time they share a fascination with identity, the challenges of leaving your native land and the deep bonds of family."



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 (pictured) 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 us - 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 *Spamalot* meets *The Book Of Mormon*... squared."



Dial M For Murder

Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Tues 16 - Sat 20 March

Samantha Womack and Tom Chambers star in Frederick Knott's erotic tale of betrayal, passion and murder - best known, of course, from its

1954 Alfred Hitchcock-directed film version starring Ray Milland and Grace Kelly... When Tony becomes convinced that wife Margot is having an affair, he devises a means of having her murdered while at the same time ensuring he has a watertight alibi. But not everything goes according to plan...

Chaplin: Birth Of A Tramp

The Old Rep, Birmingham, Fri 2 & Sat 3 April



Charlie Chaplin's stellar Hollywood career was all the more remarkable given that his childhood had been spent in abject poverty. The son of an alcoholic father and a mother who would eventually succumb to psychosis, he was brought up in a late-19th century London slum and twice sent to the workhouse before the age of nine... The critically acclaimed Arrows & Traps are the company behind this psychological exploration of the silent-movie era's biggest, brightest and perhaps most surprising star.

Macbeth

Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Mon 24 - Wed 26 May; Albany Theatre, Coventry, Wed 20 October

Having been spurred into action by the prophecies of three supernatural women - and egged on by his conniving wife - Macbeth's desire to be king of Scotland sees him slaughtering first Duncan and then Banquo. As the pressure mounts and his grip on sanity weakens, he decides to commit even more atrocities - including the murder of women and children...

This latest version of Shakespeare's famous tragedy is presented by Daniel Taylor Productions.



By The Waters Of Liverpool

Albany Theatre, Coventry, Sun 28 March; Malvern Theatres, Sat 6 & Sun 7 November



Helen Forrester's autobiographical play - from her same-titled bestselling book - is set in the 1930s and finds the teenage Helen fighting a bitter battle with her parents for the right to educate herself and go out to work. Life, however, has a habit of getting in the way of even the best-laid plans - and so it proves for Helen...

Following her family's fall from grace, she finds herself taken from school to work as an 'unpaid slave' looking after her siblings. But with Britain on the brink of war, the arrival in her life of a tall, strong seaman provides Helen with the chink of light for which she's been so desperately searching...

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must see musicals coming to the Midlands...



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.

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.



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.

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...



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'*.

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.



Menopause The Musical

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...





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.

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...



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.



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...Nicest Kids In Town.

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 spiningting 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...





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."



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.

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...

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13 DECEMBER 16:00 - Lantern Service OUTSIDE EVENT TICKETED (FREE)

19:00 - Light in the Darkness LIMITED NUMBERS PER 15 MINS
A vigil for everyone facing a difficult Christmas

14 DECEMBER 19:00 - Meditation at the Manger LIMITED NUMBERS PER 15 MINS

15 DECEMBER 19:00 - Out of Bethlehem - A Cry LIMITED NUMBERS PER 15 MINS
A vigil of reflection and support for today's people of Bethlehem

16-22 DECEMBER from 17:00 - Cathedral Illuminated TICKETED (PAID)

19 DECEMBER 14:00 & 15:00 - Carols Around the Tree OUTSIDE EVENT TICKETED (FREE)

20 DECEMBER 15:00 - Share the Gift TICKETED (FREE)

23 DECEMBER 19:00 - Service of Lessons & Carols TICKETED (FREE)

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24 DECEMBER 15:00 - Crib Service OUTSIDE EVENT TICKETED (FREE)

19:00 - Service of Lessons & Carols TICKETED (FREE)

22:00 - First Eucharist of Christmas TICKETED (FREE)

Christmas Day

8:00 - Traditional Language Eucharist

10:30 - Christmas Day Eucharist TICKETED (FREE)

12:30 - Christmas Day Said Eucharist

16:00 - Evening Prayer

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