

Coventry & Warwickshire

ISSUE 418 NOVEMBER 2021

What's On

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

BY IAIN LAUHLAN

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Coventry

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Julia Donaldson's children's favourite on stage at The Core



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BBC Good Food Show winter edition at the NEC





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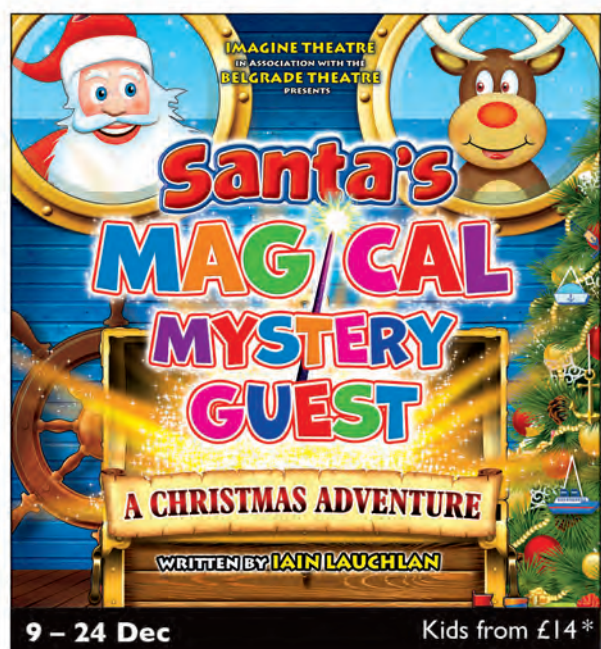
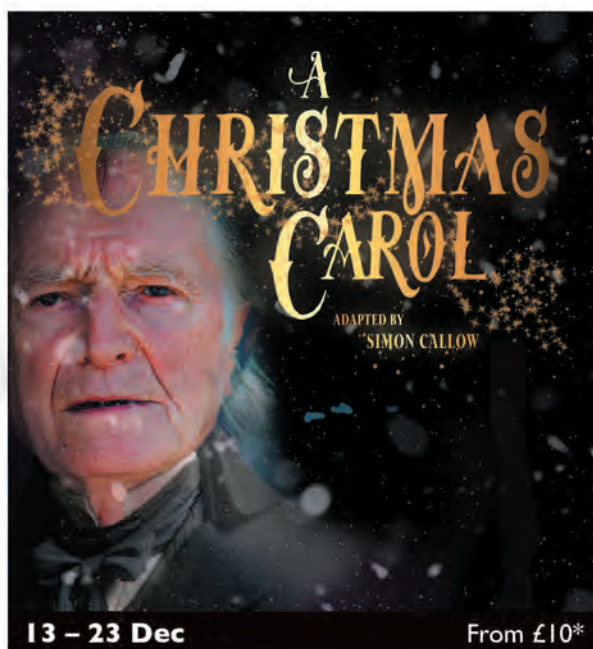
MatildaTheMusical.com
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE, LONDON



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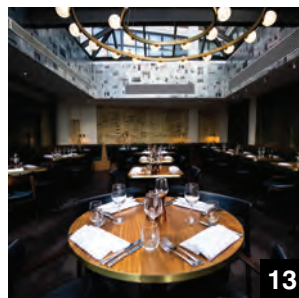
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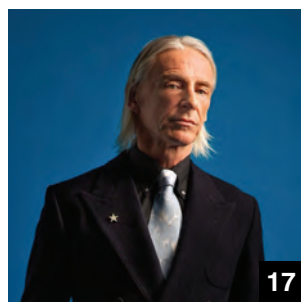
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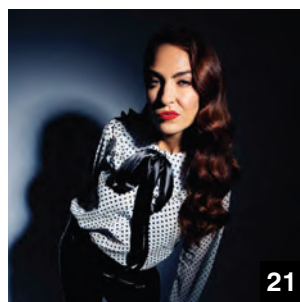
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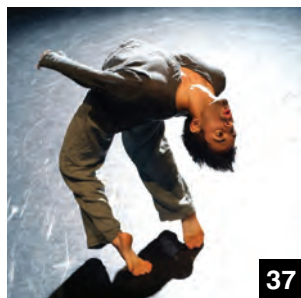
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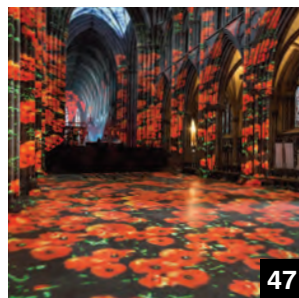
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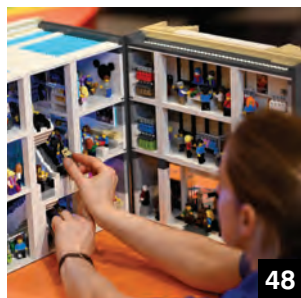
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What's On
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New leadership team at the Belgrade Theatre

The Board of the Coventry Belgrade has announced the appointment of the theatre's new senior leadership, succeeding outgoing Executive Director Joanna Reid and Chief Executive & Artistic Director Hamish Glen. Laura Elliot has been named as the venue's chief executive. She will be responsible for overall strategy and the running of the commercial side of the Belgrade. Corey Campbell - who is currently one of three artistic directors of the theatre for Coventry's year as City of Culture - has been appointed to the new post of creative director. Corey will be focusing on the theatre's artistic output across both its professional and community areas.

Much Ado about the RSC's spring season

Next spring will see a Shakespeare play being performed in Stratford-upon-Avon's Royal Shakespeare Theatre for the first time since the pandemic.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's new production of *Much Ado About Nothing* will be helmed by Roy Alexander Weise, the joint artistic director of the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre.

For more information about *Much Ado* and the rest of the RSC's spring 2022 season, visit rsc.org.uk



Quality chamber music at popular Stratford festival

This year's Stratford Music Festival takes place at various venues around the town from Friday 19 to Sunday 28 November. Highlights include the Orchestra of the Swan performing Prokofiev's *Peter And The Wolf*, and concerts by the town's choral society and chamber choir. For more information and to book tickets, visit stratfordmusicfestival.com

Second outing for new Coventry rock opera

A second performance of new rock opera *City Of Burning Spires* takes place in Coventry this month.

Written by local musician Simon Gibbons and performed by the Phoenix From The Ashes Band, *City Of Burning Spires* is based on Simon's grandparents' experiences of World War Two and the Coventry Blitz. The show is being presented at The Arches Venue on Sunday 7 November.

Tickets are available from ticket247.co.uk

Jeff Wayne's War Of The Worlds back in the spring

Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of *The War Of The Worlds* - Alive On Stage! will be stopping off at Birmingham's Resorts World Arena on 24 March as part of a brand-new arena tour. The show will star *Strictly Come Dancing* favourite Kevin Clifton, *Blue*'s Duncan James, *Steps*' Claire Richards, *Inglorious*' Nathan James and *The Moody Blues*' Justin Hayward. Liam Neeson also contributes, in 3D holography... Tickets for the show are on sale at livenation.co.uk



After-dark experience at Compton Verney

Midlanders can next spring discover 'the night-time wonder' of Warwickshire venue Compton Verney through a 'wonderful spectacle' of light and sound (Friday 11 February - Sunday 6 March).

The presentation features an illuminated trail through the woodland and around the parkland. Visitors will be invited to 'explore stunning light installations, walk through the changing Light Curve, immerse themselves in the carpet of colour on the main lawn, and be amazed by the sparkling light beams across the lake'. For more information, visit comptonverney.org.uk



Quiz Night at the Motor Museum

The British Motor Museum is hosting a brand-new Quiz Night on Tuesday 9 November.

The quiz will be led by special guest Danny Hopkins, the editor of *Practical Classics Magazine*. All proceeds from the event will go towards the vital work of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust.

Malcolm Stent to host Songs Of Praise show

Popular Midlands comedian Malcolm Stent is this month hosting a special Songs Of Praise Christmas Spectacular at The Core Theatre in Solihull (16 November).

The two-hour show will feature carols and band pieces - performed by the West Midlands Fellowship Band - and piano-accompanied songs and comedy.

For more information, visit thecoretheatresolihull.co.uk

Textiles galore!

Compton Verney's popular Textile Fair is making a welcome return this month (Saturday 13 & Sunday 14 November).

Featuring local artists and makers, the event provides visitors with the opportunity to browse a range of stalls and indulge in some early Christmas shopping.

Big Parade auction raises £368,800

The auction of 30 individually designed elephant statues, all of which featured in Worcester's Big Parade art trail, has raised £368,800 for St Richard's Hospice, a local charity which provides care for people with life-limiting conditions.

The Big Parade saw the statues being displayed across Worcester for an eight-week period during the summer. Two of the featured sculptures were each sold for £36,000 at the auction.

A similar giraffe trail in 2018 raised £210,000 for the hospice.



Disney's Beauty And The Beast heading to the Midlands

Disney's stage musical version of Beauty And The Beast is coming to Birmingham.

Reimagined and redesigned in a completely new production featuring state-of-the-art technology, the award-winning show stops off at

Birmingham Hippodrome from Thursday 3 to Saturday 26 March...

For more information and to book tickets, visit beautyandthebeastmusical.co.uk

Best of luck, Jeffrey!

The founder of Birmingham early music ensemble Ex Cathedra - Jeffrey Skidmore - has been shortlisted in the conductor category of the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Awards 2021.

Jeffrey's inclusion marks the first time the Society has shortlisted a conductor whose career has been dedicated to the choral genre.

The award winner will be announced at a special presentation event at Wigmore Hall on Monday 1 November.

Best of luck, Jeffrey!



Yellow Brick Road to lead Dorothy and friends to Midlands venue next month

The One Show's Matt Baker and Jenny 'The Vixen' Ryan from ITV's The Chase will next month star in a brand-new production of The Wizard Of Oz at Birmingham's Resorts World Arena {22 & 23 December}.

The production will be performed on the world's biggest pantomime stage - the equivalent in size of four London Palladiums - plus two mobile stages that will travel around the arena.

For more information and to book tickets, visit resortsworldarena.co.uk

Winter Funland comes to the NEC for Christmas

A 'festive spectacular' - comprising a gigantic ice-skating rink, a traditional circus, a full-size fairground and a Santa's grotto - is coming to the Midlands next month. Officially the UK's largest indoor funfair, Winter Funland runs at the NEC Arena in Birmingham from Thursday 9 December to Sunday 2 January. For more information and to book tickets, visit winterfunland.com



Prep school to start own chorister programme

Bilton Grange Preparatory School (part of the Rugby School Group) will be the first prep school to start its own independent chorister programme - for girls and boys. Already a pre-eminent prep school for music, Bilton Grange will now provide children with the opportunity to become part of separate chorister teams of four boys and four girls from each year group (years three to eight). Children between the ages of six and 11 who love to sing are being invited to attend a Chorister Experience Day on 7 November. For more details, visit rugbyschool.co.uk/co-curricular/chorister-programme



Talking Change at Warwick Arts Centre

This month's Change Festival - taking place at Coventry's Warwick Arts Centre from the 5th to the 7th - is inviting visitors to 'rise up' to the challenge of climate change via a programme of theatre, cabaret, discussions, music, workshops, craft and film.

The event will share stories and inspiration about how people can individually and collectively make a difference in terms of the ongoing climate & environmental crisis. For more information and to book tickets, visit changefestival.org

The Snowman flies in to Coventry Cathedral

Multi-award-winning company Carrot Productions is bringing its touring presentation of Raymond Briggs' The Snowman to Coventry Cathedral this Christmas (23 December).

The production will see a screening of the 1982 animated classic being accompanied by a live professional orchestra. For more information and to book tickets, visit coventrycathedral.org.uk

L.O.L Surprise heading to the Midlands

The world's most popular dolls are coming to Birmingham.

If your kids are big fans of the LOL Surprise Dolls, then L.O.L. Surprise! LIVE VIP Party! In Collaboration With VisitMalta is an extravaganza they won't want to miss. Showing at the city's Utilita Arena (from 26 to 28 December) and featuring live action and holograms, the production combines 'the vibes of a club, concert and dance party with Instagrammable sets, flawless costumes and elaborate dance moves'. The dolls have become a global phenomenon

in recent years, with numerous celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, known to collect them.

Tickets for the Birmingham show are now on sale at lolsurpriseliveontour.com

New menu at Hatton Arms

The Hatton Arms in Warwick has launched a new seasonal menu, complete with an emphasis on fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

The menu features 'classic British cuisine with a bit of a modern twist'. "We're still serving turkey but with a slightly different take," explains head chef Jakub Fijak. "The menu is packed with warming and comforting food, but with the usual a la carte menu still running alongside it. So if there are any courses people would like to swap, they are very welcome to do so."

To check out the menu, visit hattonarms.com



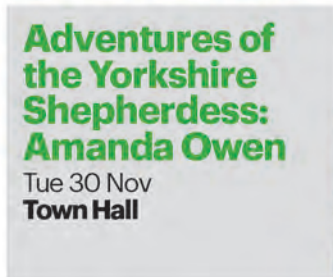
There's something for everyone at **Symphony Hall** and **Town Hall**



Spectacular Classics
Sat 13 Nov
Symphony Hall



Ronan Keating: Twenty Twenty
Thu 27 Jan 2022
Symphony Hall



Adventures of the Yorkshire Shepherdess: Amanda Owen
Tue 30 Nov
Town Hall



Adam Ant Plus Support
Tue 1 Mar 2022
Symphony Hall



Paul Carrack Plus Support
Fri 11 Mar 2022
Symphony Hall



The Sweet & Guests Limehouse Lizzy
Thu 2 Dec
Town Hall



BPSO: Proms Night Spectacular!
Sat 4 Dec
Symphony Hall



Strictly Come Dancing: The Professionals
Sun 8 May 2022
Symphony Hall



Stick Man: Live on Stage
Sun 26 Dec 2021 –
Sun 9 Jan 2022
Town Hall



In Conversation with The Sopranos
Sat 18 Jun 2022
Symphony Hall



Nina Conti

brings romance and latex to the Midlands

Comedian and ventriloquist Nina Conti this month returns to the region with The Dating Show. Completely improvised each night, the show is being described as ‘a spectacular feat of ventriloquism’. Happily for us, Nina was anything but tight-lipped when we asked her about what audiences can expect...

Could there be anything more contemporary than a comedy show with masks which looks to bring people together?

That’s what Nina Conti is aiming to achieve with The Dating Show, her new touring extravaganza featuring a gallery of latex masks, a cheeky monkey called Monkey, and a handful of willing audience members who are up for a laugh and maybe, just maybe, a little bit of romance.

The idea for this new matchmaking affair came to Nina pretty much by accident during her previous show with masks, In Your Face. “When I did masks before with an audience, I often ended up with love matches. The audience members often took it there with their body language. They could be a bit friendly and a bit flirty, and I remember thinking, ‘I have to stop things going like this or people will think I’m a sex maniac! What’s the matter with me!’” But then I thought that maybe it wasn’t me forcing it, because it was simply happening every time, so why resist? And why not do something called The Dating Show?”

Nina performed a few trial runs of the show at London’s Soho Theatre just before the pandemic struck. In the months which followed, she honed the show further. “To avoid it becoming this hetero-normative thing, you want to get everyone involved. In the Soho shows, I opened with Monkey interviewing a bunch of people in the audience, and whoever displayed the most warmth was the person I went with. I’m not after eccentrics, just likeability. Then we got them on stage and put a mask on them, and had a very low-key chat about their past relationships and what they

were looking for next. Hopefully those we get up could be any kind of person and not just the Cilla Black demographic.”

For around 20 years now, Nina has pretty much cornered the comedy-circuit market in ventriloquism. For those who haven’t seen her show, this genre might still seem a bit old-fashioned. Nina was sceptical about it herself at first too, when it was suggested to her by her old mentor, Ken Campbell: “I would never have gone to a ventriloquism show, and when Ken suggested it, I was completely uninterested. I thought he was mad! But then there was a definite lightbulb moment. I’d been practising with those awful mannequins, and it was so end-of-the-pier and saucy - I didn’t like it. But then I remembered this monkey puppet that I stole off a mate, and I wondered if his mouth could move. I had to take some stuffing out and put my hand into his face, but then, as soon as he started to talk, I thought, ‘Woah! Everything you’re saying is coming from a wider place than my own head’. It was a really good feeling.”

Nina has since created numerous critically acclaimed shows, while sidekick Monkey has become quite the cult figure.

“I don’t actually think the ventriloquial aspect is my show’s best selling-point. It’s a side-issue that needs to be overcome, given that it still has a bad rap. I don’t think people leave my shows thinking, ‘Oh, that was a good ventriloquist show’. I think you can forget it’s a ventriloquist show. I know I do, to the point where, later, I think, ‘Oh, did I do the ventriloquist bits?’ I can get a bit carried away!”

The elaborate masks (which cover the bottom half of a person’s face so that the eyes are on display while Nina adds her voice to proceedings) have added a new dimension to her work: “We’ll probably be working with about 14 masks in total, as they have to fit the shape of the face or have their skin-tone, and be male or female. I have a macabre dungeon of faces hanging off a rack. It might look a bit S&M! I just ordered a bunch of new ones that you can change by adding a moustache or painting the lips differently. The guy I use is a ventriloquist in the Philippines, and his masks are very robust. But they really have to be. It’s awful if they stop working halfway through because if that happens, the magic breaks.”

Nina is keen to keep her show fresh, and to make it as different as possible each and every night: “First and foremost, it’s a funny show. I’m not actually trying to match-make. It would be very funny if it actually worked out for anybody. The first time I did Live At The Apollo, I got a couple up and there seemed to be romance in the air, but I suspect they filed out of the theatre their separate ways. But I’m putting songs in. I did an improvathon with the Showstoppers guys, making a song up as we go. I’m really bad at singing, but it’s funny when the date breaks into song. And it turns out that a bad song is better than no song!”

.....

Nina Conti brings The Dating Show to The Alexandra, Birmingham, on Mon 8 November, and then visits Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, on Sat 20 November

CHORISTER EXPERIENCE DAY


SUNDAY 7 NOVEMBER, 2021

Do you have a son or daughter who loves to sing?

*Have you ever considered entering them for a
Choristership, but had no idea what was involved?*

*Our Chorister Experience Day gives children between the
age of six and 11 the chance to be a chorister for the day.*

*No previous experience is necessary, just a love of singing
and an enthusiasm to be part of a successful team.*

A photograph of two children, a boy and a girl, singing in a choir. They are wearing blue blazers and holding black songbooks. The boy is on the left, looking up and singing, and the girl is on the right, also singing. They are in a church with wooden pews in the background.

RUGBY SCHOOL

www.rugbyschool.co.uk

A red logo of a lion rampant, which is the crest of Bilton Grange.

BILTON GRANGE

www.biltongrange.co.uk

Email: admissions@biltongrange.co.uk to book a place at the Chorister Experience Day

To find out more about our new Chorister Programme, visit

www.rugbyschool.co.uk/co-curricular/chorister-programme/



REVIEW: The Telegraph Hotel

Hold the front page - new Coventry eatery set to become a diners' favourite

The last time I ate at what is now the Telegraph Hotel, it would have been a takeaway sandwich at my desk while working as a sub-editor on Coventry's local tabloid. How Times (and its predecessor The Citizen, ahem) have changed. The journalists moved out nine years ago, and the building at 157 Corporation Street, which was home to the city's newspapers for more than 50 years, is now a chic hotel.

Developers CDP showed a lot of respect for the iconic building in the refit, retaining many of its original features - the reception and foyer area looks much the same as it did when members of the public could come in to place a classified advert - and there's a range of 1950s and '60s period furniture to reflect the paper's glory days. You'll also find old editions, reproduced covers and other memorabilia and artefacts

dotted around the 88-room hotel, which also contains the luxurious Lord Iliffe Suite - a reimagining of the original owner's private apartment - and a room containing Coventry City football programmes from 1970/71, the season they were designed by revered graphic artist John Elvin.

The retro-chic style continues with the hotel's eateries, with the Forme & Chase restaurant, bar & lounge designed to recreate the glamour of the 1950s, and seasonal rooftop bar Generators featuring an industrial printworks theme. The latter specialises in cocktails and Mediterranean tapas, while the restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and evening meals, all in a glazed courtyard setting that I'm fairly certain was the car park when I used to work there.

It's an undeniably classy environment, though yet to truly find its feet - or market - judging by the paucity of diners on the Thursday evening I visited. Hotel guests are obviously a key focus (dinner-inclusive packages are a popular option) but a pre-theatre menu might be worth considering given the venue's proximity to the Belgrade over the road. A couple more vegetarian options beyond the two fairly uninspiring main menu choices wouldn't go amiss either.

Carnivores are rather better catered for, and I opted for one of three steak options - a perfectly rendered steak frites with watercress and radish salad and my chosen chilli & herb chimichurri sauce (at no extra cost - a rare treat). My companion opted for the harissa chicken breast that I initially fancied, not least for the kaleidoscopic tomato, pepper, olive and feta salad that accompanied it. Throw in some pitta bread and hummus and it

was undoubtedly the night's headline item.

Our starters ('small plates') were never likely to make the front page, although my crispy pork slice - effectively a fish finger made of pulled pork and served with intricately presented piccalilli, cauliflower and celery heart - was savoury and tasty enough to earn a byline on page two. My companion's prawn & avocado cocktail looked the part - and was at least twice the size of my dish - but she was disappointed that the Bloody Mary mayonnaise tasted more like Thousand Island dressing.

But stop press - our desserts ('puddings' according to the menu) were both definitely worthy of page lead status. The crème brûlée with shortbread was as good as any I've had, while the Biscoff cheesecake with Chantilly cream and toffee sauce was apparently "gorgeous but a bit rich" - and also all gone before I could conduct my own taste-test. I wouldn't go as far as to say the restaurant had saved the best till last, but it was a lot like ignoring the main news and flicking straight to the back page to check the sport.

In terms of overall editorial comment, the scoop on the Telegraph Hotel is mostly positive - it's a terrific addition to Coventry's accommodation offering, and with a bit of time and some menu finessing I can see it becoming a diners' favourite, too... *Steve Adams*

Food:
 Service:
 Ambience:
 Overall value:
OVERALL

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 telegraph-hotel.com

20 ARMONICO CONSORT

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★★★★★ THE TELEGRAPH
★★★★★ THE TIMES



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AC ACADEMY CHOIRS
DIRECTOR | CHRISTOPHER MONKS

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ARMONICO CONSORT & BAROQUE PLAYERS
DIRECTOR | CHRISTOPHER MONKS

8th December, 7.30pm
SOLOIST | COUNTERTENOR IESTYN DAVIS
Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry 02476 524524
TICKETS: From £15.00
21st December, 7.30pm
Victoria Hall, Stoke
0844 871 7615
TICKETS: From £22.40
plus booking fee
23rd December, 7.30pm
Malvern Theatres
01684 892277
TICKETS: From £25.00



Come and Sing at Christmas with John Rutter

FESTIVE VOCAL WORKSHOP

18th December, 2-5.30pm
Coventry Cathedral
01926 334418
TICKETS: £16.50



Carols by Candlelight

ARMONICO CONSORT
DIRECTOR | CHRISTOPHER MONKS

20th December, 7.30pm
The Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick
01926 334418
TICKETS: From £15.50
This performance has been generously supported by
David Phillips & Phillips and Becker Accountants Ltd.



F. Scarlatti & J.S. Bach

ARMONICO CONSORT
DIRECTOR | CHRISTOPHER MONKS
SOLO VIOLIN | RACHEL PODGER

29th January, 7.30pm, Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick
01926 334418 TICKETS: From £13.50

5th February, 7.30pm, Malvern Theatres
01684 892277 TICKETS: From £28.00

This performance has been generously supported by David Phillips & Phillips and Becker Accountants Ltd.



Christmas Music by Candlelight



EX CATHEDRA

Jeffrey Skidmore conductor

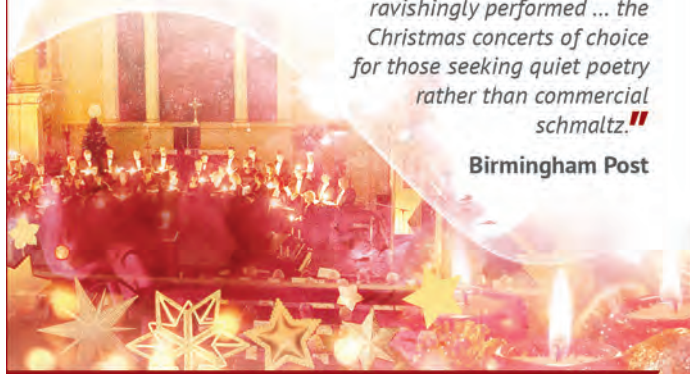
Quintin Beer associate conductor

Tue 7 Dec, 7.30pm

Coventry Cathedral

"one of Birmingham's real
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ravishingly performed ... the
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rather than commercial
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ORCHESTRA OF
The Swan

Autum/Winter 21-22

Stratford Play House, Stratford-upon-Avon

Tue 16 Nov 2021 Labyrinths
Tue 7 Dec 2021 The Twelve Tales of Christmas
Wed 19 Jan 2022 A Scottish Fantasy, Friends' Soirée
Tue 8 Feb 2022 Loops & Verses

Stratford-on-Avon Music Festival

Sat 20 Nov 2021 String Theory
Sun 21 Nov 2021 Peter and the Wolf with Toyah Willcox

Drapers' Hall, Coventry

Fri 26 Nov 2021 TIMELAPSE 2.0
Thur 24 Feb 2022 Rebel Rebel

Coventry Cathedral

Fri/Sat 4-5 Feb 2022 Symphony of Us

Royal Birmingham Conservatoire

Wed 8 Dec 2021 The Twelve Tales of Christmas

Warwick Hall, Warwick School

Thur 20 Jan 2022 Mozart Clarinet Concerto

Find out more...

orchestraoftheswan.org



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plan to celebrate
Christmas this
year we're here
for you

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Classical music from across the region...



Orchestra Of The Swan: String Theory

Stratford Town Hall, Stratford-upon-Avon, Sat 20 November

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

famous composers.

This latest concert sees them presenting a programme featuring Mozart's Divertimento in D major, Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings and String Quartet No1, and Mendelssohn's Octet in E flat major.

Brodsky Quartet

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, Thurs 11 November



Celebrating 50 glorious years in 2022, Brodsky features two of the original members - Ian Belton and Jacqueline Thomas - while a third, Paul Cassidy, has been with the quartet since the early 1980s. Alongside a wide-ranging classical music repertoire, Brodsky has also dabbled with rock and pop music, collaborating with, among other major names, Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello and Björk. The evening's programme features string quartets by Beethoven (No15), Shostakovich (No7), and broadcaster and critic Stephen Johnson, whose composition is here receiving its world premiere.

G4

Coventry Cathedral, Tues 30 November

After scoring a hit on The X-Factor in 2004, G4 quickly became one of the country's biggest crossover classical groups. Although they disbanded three years and three albums later - citing as the reason their need to pursue individual interests - they reunited in 2014 for their 10th anniversary and have been going strong ever since.

They perform in the cathedral as part of a Christmas tour that will see them presenting a wide range of festive classics - from much-loved carols such as Silent Night to more modern songs like When A Child Is Born and All I Want For Christmas.



Jubilee Quartet

Drapers Hall, Coventry, Fri 12 November (lunchtime); Royal Pump Rooms, Leamington Spa, Fri 12 November (evening)

Friday the 12th is certainly a busy day for the Jubilee Quartet, with the highly acclaimed ensemble presenting both lunchtime and evening performances of Vilém Tauský's Coventry: A Meditation. The piece was written by the Czech composer in November 1940, when, on entering the city with a Czech Free Army ambulance, he witnessed the sight of the cathedral ruins smouldering post-Blitz. At the time, Tauský was stationed in Leamington - which is where the quartet travel for the second concert of the day. Mendelssohn's Quartet No2 in A minor also features on the bill, while Schubert's Death And The Maiden is added to the programme for the evening concert at the Pump Rooms.



Stratford Symphony Orchestra and Festival Chorus

Stratford Play House, Stratford-upon-Avon, Sun 28 November

Stratford Symphony Orchestra started life back in the 1960s as Stratford Concert Orchestra, since which time it has grown both in size and reputation.

There are now almost 60 playing members, coming together once a week to rehearse, and presenting three concerts in the town each year.

Here performing under the umbrella of the Stratford Music Festival, the orchestra presents a programme featuring Beethoven's Egmont Overture, Weber's Bassoon Concerto and Mozart's Requiem Mass.

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Roger Daltrey

Symphony Hall, Birmingham,
Sun 7 November

"The truth is, singers need to sing - use it or lose it," says The Who frontman Roger Daltrey, ahead of a special evening featuring Who classics and rarities, solo hits and a fan Q&A.

"Throughout my life I've sung with so many great musicians - from the heavy rock of The Who and Wilko Johnson, to the Irish lilt of The Chieftains. On this tour, I want to take the audience on a musical journey through my career as a singer, with a show of songs and sounds that explores and surprises."



Paul Weller

HMV Empire, Coventry, Mon 15 November

From the heady punk-pop days of The Jam in the 1970s and the more soulful Style Council of the 1980s, Paul Weller graduated to a solo career consisting of solid guitar work punctuated by flashes of lyrical ingenuity and no shortage of ironic backhanders.

Having released his 16th solo album, *Fat Pop* (Volume 1), earlier this year, Weller recently explained in an interview with the Guardian: "Since I've been sober, which is 11 years this year, I get more from music. Not just my music, but all music. It means more to me, and it's more direct to my heart and my soul. And certainly playing it. Playing sober is so different, because you become more conscious; you're more in the moment."



Ward Thomas

Leamington Assembly, Wed 3 November

Comprising twin sisters Catherine and Lizzy, Ward Thomas made history in 2016 by becoming the first British country-music act to score a number one on the official albums

chart (with their second studio record, *Cartwheels*).

The pair visit Leamington this month as part of a new UK tour to celebrate the release of fourth studio album *Invitation*, which was written during the UK's national lockdown.

George Hinchliffe's Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry,
Sun 14 November

Providing entertainment, joy, fun, strum and artistry, the world's first Ukulele Orchestra are visiting Coventry this month. The independent rock stars of the 'bonsai guitar' have plucked and sung, joked and whistled with Clean Bandit, Robbie Williams, Madness and Cat Stevens.

Tom Robinson

Drapers' Hall, Coventry, Thurs 11 November

Veteran broadcaster and songwriter Tom Robinson here presents his solo show and the first ever live-music performance in the newly restored Drapers' Hall.

Tom founded his own group TRB (Tom Robinson Band) with the late Danny Kustow in 1976. Early supporters of Rock Against Racism, the group went on to record one of the landmark singles of the UK punk era, 2-4-6-8 Motorway.

To date, Robinson, who hosts weekly shows on BBC Radio 6 Music, has released over 20 albums, either as a solo artist or as part of a band.

Peggy Sue

The Tin Music & Arts, Coventry,
Wed 24 November

Peggy Sue are London-via-Brighton indie duo Rosa Slade and Katy Young. Founded in 2007, the band's signature blend of brooding anti-folk and fiery indie pop was born in basements, living rooms and small clubs. To date, the pair have released four albums and have toured with the likes of Jack White, Local Natives and First Aid Kit.



Isata Kanneh-Mason

Emerging classical star set to wow audiences in Birmingham and across Europe

Isata Kanneh-Mason is to join the European Concert Hall Organisation's Rising Stars series for 2021-22 after being nominated by B:Music. She's now set to perform in prestigious concert halls across the UK - including Town Hall in Birmingham - and Europe. What's On caught up with her to find out more...

One of the UK's most exciting young classical musicians will perform at Town Hall, a B:Music venue, for the very first time later this year. Isata Kanneh-Mason – who is the eldest of the seven musically prodigious Kanneh-Mason siblings – has won a place on ECHO's Rising Stars touring series for the 2021-22 season, during which she will showcase her talent in Birmingham and a number of other cities across the UK and Europe. Kanneh-Mason's personally curated concert programme will include a brand-new piece of music which has been specially commissioned for the tour.

Ahead of her Town Hall performance Kanneh-Mason spoke to us about the honour of being included on the 2021 ECHO programme, performing with her family and the

importance of supporting and developing classical music talent following the pandemic-enforced shutdown of live music.

Congratulations on being successfully nominated by B:Music for the ECHO Rising Stars programme! How exciting is it to be taking part in this concert series?

I'm really looking forward to playing in Birmingham and cities across Europe. I'm really excited about the programme as well because it has lots of Rachmaninoff on there - including his preludes and tableaux etudes, which I love – and I haven't really played solo Rachmaninoff before, so that will be exciting. I'll also be playing two classical sonatas which I love, a Mozart and a Beethoven. There's also a new commission

being written for the programme which I'm really excited about, because it's always wonderful playing new music. I'm really looking forward to live concerts and a tour.

What do you hope to gain from the experience?

The experience of playing the same programme again and again to lots of different audiences is really special, because you get to feel how the programme grows over time and how different audiences react to the music in different places. I think that'll be a really wonderful experience.

You'll play a solo concert at Town Hall for the first time as part of the programme having previously performed at the



B:Music venue, with your brother Sheku Kanneh-Mason.

Birmingham is a city that I have a fondness for because I have family there who I've been to visit a few times, so I always associate the city with family. It's a lovely city and I always love going there: Town Hall and Symphony Hall are both such beautiful spaces.

During lockdown you started giving performances online, including a piano recital from your home for B:Music. How welcome has it been to keep performing, albeit digitally, during the pandemic?

It's great that we've been able to do this, because you can reach out to people from all over the world and potentially more people than you could in a concert hall. But obviously I miss in-person live performance, and it's not the same as a musician to be playing and not have the people there because we really feed off the energy of the audience. It's definitely difficult to not have that.

How important is it to keep supporting other young and developing musicians, whose progress or access to music may have been stunted by the pandemic, through their burgeoning careers?

It's definitely important. It's been a difficult time for young musicians because so many concerts have been cancelled or rescheduled, and it can feel like there's less space for young musicians. It's therefore even more important to give them a voice and a space to play. Julian Lloyd Webber recently hosted a radio series showcasing and talking to young musicians, because he has the same concerns.

Do you have any advice for young musicians whose passion for music may have actually been sparked during lockdown?

I'd say that's wonderful! It's important to find a person in the industry who you really resonate with: when you see that someone doing something, it then in turn helps you to see yourself doing it and gives you inspiration.

Find someone who inspires you and listen to as much music as you can, see them live when that's possible and then just practice and enjoy it.

How much are you looking forward to the safe return of live audiences at your concerts?

I think it will be such an emotional moment! Over the past year there were a couple of times when restrictions eased and we were able to have concerts, albeit with a third of the audience there. Each time I felt such an energy from the audience: everyone is just so excited to have live music back. When it comes back again in full it will be really, really special.

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Isata Kanneh-Mason will perform at Town Hall on Thursday 25 November 2021 at 7:30PM. Tickets available at bmusic.co.uk



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GARY POWNDLAND

talks family, foxes and finding fame...

Online sensation Gary Pownland is storming the comedy scene, with tickets to his new 'family and friends' show selling like hot cakes. We caught up with the lad from Wolverhampton to find out more...

What was life like for you growing up in Wolverhampton, Gary?

Life was tough. My mom and dad popped out for a loaf when I was younger, which is quite an ordinary thing, but I realised as they were leaving that they were carrying suitcases. Straight away I thought to myself, "How much bread do they think we can eat?" My nan took me in after that, and despite the initial heartbreak of my parents abandoning me, I had a lovely childhood.

As a Midlander, what are you proudest of?

Our big hearts and sense of humour. We are the salt of the earth. Whether it's lending each other a cup of sugar or buying someone a pint when they're going through hard times, we all stick together.

How did you find fame?

One of my videos went viral online after I ranted about Wolves staff, fans and even Mr Sizzle not turning up for an evening game at Molineux. I was disgusted by how fickle our supporters could be after a few bad results. Anyway, it was pointed out to me that Wolves were playing away at Leeds that night. But it was too late - I'd already uploaded the video.

Where does your money come from?

From my nan what died when she died when she fell down the stairs from when I didn't push her. That and the swizz we sell at the live shows. Swizz is slang for merchandise. I used to do personal appearances too, but nobody booked me since I did an appearance at a wedding and got hammered. I ended up being dragged out of a taxi, and the wedding cake smashed to pieces all over the floor.

What do you do in your spare time?

Chill out on Fifa. Walk my foxes. Watch the Wolves. Drink wine.

What would be your animal of choice to add to your family of foxes?

I didn't choose the foxes, they chose me. If I could add any animal to my family, it would

be the fox cubs' mother, Trixy. She was tragically killed in a road accident, and the driver fled the scene. We were able to follow the sounds of the van as it sped off, as Mr Whippy had forgotten to turn his ice-cream van music off. We didn't report him to the police as we're not grassers, but we've had free 99s ever since.

As a fox lover, do you feel any empathy towards chickens?

I feel for all animals, bless them. My foxes don't eat chickens, though, if that's what you're accusing them of. They eat coco pops. Twice a day, and it costs me a fortune.

Who has the nicest tail - a fox or a squirrel?

I've never really looked at a fox or a squirrel in that way. Yes, it's 2021 and call me old-fashioned, but it's women all the way for me.

Who wears the trousers in the house - you or your sister, Tash?

Tash only wears dresses and I only wear trousers/jeans/joggers. But if there's any sign of things kicking off or anyone gives me any rubbish, Tash is always there. She's not the boss of me, though, and is very respectful that I took her and Kaylied in after her incident with the gas man.

What's the nicest thing you've ever done for someone, Gary?

Not to brag but I once saw a little boy's football roll under a bus. The bus absolutely flattened it. I picked the ball up and threw it over someone's hedge. The boy never knew what became of his ball. He'll never see it again but at least he

can still live in hope that one day it will knock the door and say, "We've missed you, son".

Who is your ideal woman?

Steve McDonald's missus off Coronation Street in the '90s. Absolutely unreal.

What's your favourite meal?

I really like Calpol sandwiches - hear me out. It's like a cake and a sandwich in one. It fills you up plus it brings your temperature down.

What are you most looking forward to, and what makes you most nervous, about introducing your family & friends to Midlands audiences?

I'm looking forward to meeting my fans and having Selfridge photos afterwards. To be honest, I don't get nervous about many things. The nerves help me tell people what a right proper joke it is in this country. I do worry, though, that the venues might want a percentage of the t-shirt sales.

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Gary Pownland And Friends will be at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Thurs 18 November; Palace Theatre, Redditch, Sat 20 November; Birmingham Town Hall, Tues 21 December; Prince of Wales Theatre, Cannock, Sat 15 January; King Hall, Stoke-on-Trent, Sat 29 January; Walsall Arena, Sat 12 March and HMV Empire Coventry, Sat 2 April





Paul Chowdhry Dudley Town Hall, Thurs 4 & Fri 5 November

One of the most talented and popular Asian comedians on the UK comedy circuit, Paul Chowdhry's stand-up act taps into the multicultural diversity of contemporary Britain.

His visit to Dudley sees him presenting his

latest touring show, Family-Friendly Comedian, an evening of comedy covering all manner of topical subjects, from the UK's handling of the pandemic to Tom Cruise landing his helicopter in a Warwickshire garden.



Henning Wehn

Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa, 26 November; Malvern Theatres, 28 November; Stafford Gatehouse, 17 February; Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, 23 - 24 February

Presenting a style of humour that's been described as 'Teutonic jolliness at its best', self-appointed German comedy ambassador Henning Wehn tours to the Midlands this month with new show It'll All Come Out In The Wash.

Samples of his comedy include: "With stand-up in Britain, what you have to do is bloody swearing. In Germany, we don't have to swear. Reason being, things work," and also, "World War Two was a painful time for my family. My grandfather died in a concentration camp. He got drunk one night and fell out of his guard tower..."

Adam Kay

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Sun 21 November; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Sat 11 December

With numerous sell-out years at the Edinburgh Fringe and tens of millions of YouTube hits under his belt (not to mention a host of celebrity admirers, including Stephen Fry, more than happy to sing his praises), Adam Kay is no flash-in-the-pan comedian. The former obstetrician and gynaecologist scored a big touring hit with his show, This Is Going To Hurt: Secret Diaries Of A Junior Doctor, and is now out on the road again, this time with Twas The Nightshift Before Christmas.

Adam describes the show as "a love letter to all those who spend their festive season on the front line, busily removing babies and baubles from the various places they get stuck at this most wonderful time of the year".



Rob Beckett

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Sun 7 November

First tickling the nation's collective funny-bone in 2009, Rob is a high-tempo laughter-merchant whose relationship with comedy began as a youngster: "I was the middle child and desperate for attention, so I decided to try and get it by making my friends and family chuckle. Or, better still, belly laugh."

Gags include, "You know you're working-class when your TV's bigger than your bookcase," and, "My girlfriend worries about me cheating on a night out. I say to her, 'Why would I have a burger when I've got steak at home?' The only problem is, when you're drunk, burgers are well nice." Rob visits the Grand with his touring show, Wallop.

Bridget Christie

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry,
Sun 14 November

Bridget Christie describes herself as ‘a female person’ and ‘the only stand-up to have been billed alongside both Lionel Blair and Naomi Wolf’...

Bridget’s Warwick Arts Centre stop-off sees her presenting ‘a menopause laugh-a-minute with a confused, furious, sweaty lady who is annoyed by everything’. Her gags include: “Every vagina is a unique snowflake... made of gammon”, and “Feminism is not a fad. It’s not like Angry Birds. Although it does involve a lot of angry birds. Bad example.”



Esther Manito

The Glee Club, Birmingham, Fri 19 November

Up-and-coming British-Lebanese comedian Esther Manito takes a feminist and autobiographical journey back into the 1990s with this latest stand-up offering, recalling the images and expressions of masculinity to which her adolescent self was exposed during a decade made memorable by Brit Pop and ‘lad’ culture. “I know there have been some men who’ve been dragged along to the show against their will by their partners,” says Esther, “but then the guys have come up to me afterwards and said that they’d never realised before how feminism could affect male mental health. It’s been really nice to get that kind of reaction - particularly when they’ve originally turned up thinking they were going to be listening to women moaning on for an hour.”



Katherine Ryan

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, Thurs 4 November; Symphony Hall, Birmingham, Fri 26 November; William Aston Hall, Wrexham, Sat 4 December; Utilita Arena, Birmingham, Fri 4 March

Having experienced motherhood, divorce and MTV, the award-winning Katherine Ryan is well placed indeed to take a wry look at those aspects of life that can make people feel angry and bitter. But while she often writes and performs material which proves that even the darkest of subject matter can have a funny side, she’s also got plenty in her life to feel happy about, not least the fact that she’s now married to her first love - albeit, she reveals, somewhat ‘by accident’.

This latest tour by the Canadian star of hit Netflix series *The Duchess* sees her brand-new life as a wife taking centre-stage.

“Magically my high-school boyfriend walked back into my life, and I did everything possible not to marry him,” Katherine told *The Sun*. “I really was against partnership at that point. I was looking forward to ageing alone with many dogs. And then I just loved him too much. It’s funny that fate has a way of finding you, and what’s meant for you won’t pass you.”



Luisa Omielan

The Glee Club, Birmingham, Tues 9 November; Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, Fri 19 November

Birmingham-born comedian Luisa Omielan jumped into the full glare of the spotlight a handful of years ago when, during each performance of her touring show, *Am I Right Ladies?*, she would undress on stage.

“In that show we stripped away all pretence surrounding body issues and got down to the bare facts,” says Luisa. “I love that I’m a woman, could go semi-naked to prove a point, and could then get on with being funny.”

And getting on with being funny is exactly what Luisa has been doing in the years which have followed. In the process, she’s gathered together an ever-growing army of admirers, including celebrity fans Dawn French, Lenny Henry, Richard Curtis and Ruby Wax.

She’s this month visiting Midlands venues with brand-new show *God Is A Woman*, a 75-minute exploration of ‘the true meaning of Christmas, Jesus and cunnilingus’.

“How different would the world be if women’s stories had been included more in

the Bible?” asks Luisa. “Did you know that Adam had a first wife before Eve? Her name was Lilith, and she left Adam because she wanted to do reverse cow girl and he would only do missionary. They didn’t mention *that* in the creation myth...”





The Play What I Wrote

An affectionate homage to legendary comedy double act Morecambe & Wise, hit stage show The Play What I Wrote was co-written by Birmingham Rep Artistic Director Sean Foley and is currently celebrating its 20th anniversary. To mark the occasion, Sean is directing a major revival of the show at The Rep this Christmas. What's On caught up with him to find out more...

Birmingham Rep will celebrate Christmas with the first major revival of smash-hit stage show The Play What I Wrote.

The production will be helmed by The Rep's Artistic Director Sean Foley, who co-wrote the original show with Hamish McColl, and acted in the West End production.

Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, The Play What I Wrote was a massive success, winning a host of awards and playing to packed houses in London, on Broadway and out on tour.

"It's a significant anniversary of the original production," says Sean. "And it's great to revisit that material. It was, and is, a truly great piece of comedy theatre."

The story is a homage to legendary comedy double act Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise.

"It's not an impersonation of Morecambe & Wise, so it's not a tribute show in that sense," says Sean. "There is an unknown or failing double act who are on the verge of splitting up. One of them wants to be a serious play writer, just like Ernie, and one just loves larking about and making people laugh, just like Eric."

"The show is about how they struggle to put on this Ernie character's play, which is this disastrously stupid French Revolution kind of epic, and the Eric character is constantly trying to disrupt this and put on a comedy show."

The Morecambe & Wise television shows were famous for Ernie's 'plays wot I wrote', which would feature huge stars of the day being set up for a comedy fall by the duo. Sean and Hamish ingeniously included this element in the stage show - and the production rapidly became famous for its mystery guest appearances.

"You can never promise who is going to be there because even when we were doing it in London we never knew week to week who we would get - but the level of guest star was phenomenal. We had Kylie and Sting, who were brilliant, Ralph Fiennes, and then we

went to Broadway and it was Liam Neeson and Glenn Close and Jeff Goldblum. And we had some amazing people on the tour. I mean Roger Moore did it with us on tour - it could be anyone.

"The guest star element brings a wonderful kind of liveness and almost an anarchy to the theatre. They go on stage and they are barely rehearsed. It's not just a walk-on and nod - they are in this play for 20 minutes and they have to really deliver, so there's a kind of mad, febrile pressure.

"It's like doing a first night every night because there's a new guest star. You never quite know what's going to happen. That's wonderful because that's celebrating the very liveness of theatre right before your eyes."

Sean is remaining tight-lipped about which guests Birmingham Rep audiences can expect in this revival: "It's a genuine surprise when whoever it is walks out on stage. I will certainly be asking some of those original brilliant people who've starred before. But also there's a whole new raft of stars who have emerged in the past few years - many of whom genuinely love the show.

"A few months ago I was talking to Benedict Cumberbatch, and he was a young actor who came to see The Play What I Wrote, and he said he totally loved it and he's a Morecambe & Wise fan. So I locked that away in the brain and thought, 'when I get to it I might give you a ring and see if you're up for it'."

The Morecambe & Wise Christmas Specials became an institution, with their show on 25 December 1977 viewed by more than half of the UK population. Sean is hoping to recreate some of that festive magic at The Rep: "We're going to put on a fantastic show for this 20th anniversary production. We're using our original script and I'm talking to Hamish and we'll be updating it. We have a few new tricks up our sleeve. We slightly redeveloped the show when we went to Broadway with it, adding some bells and whistles, so people have that to look forward to.

"The appeal of Morecambe & Wise at Christmas was legendary. This show does have that wonderful Christmas vibe to it, and I'm sure there will be a few references to Christmas to look out for."

So what does Sean believe is the appeal of Morecambe & Wise?

"I think there was something benign and generous without being anodyne about their comedy. The way that they basically sent up showbusiness and the acting profession was something that people love. Everyone from Laurence Olivier down thought they were two of the greatest performers of their age, and they absolutely were.

"They were brilliantly funny people, and that is the attraction. So many of their sketches or phrases have become folklore and are handed down, and there's barely a year when a new piece of footage isn't unearthed or a new documentary made.

"There will be some people, maybe younger, who don't know Morecambe & Wise, but even with those people I can guarantee that this show will give them that sense of who they were just through the inhabitation of their comic world and the fun of that. That is at the heart of the show."

Featuring Thom Tuck, Dennis Herdman and Mitesh Soni, The Play What I Wrote will be the first production Sean has directed at The Rep since taking over the helm two years ago. And he is looking forward to sharing it with new audiences: "This show has been one of the highlights of my career and it's great to be able to stage it at Birmingham Rep. What audiences can expect from it is laughs. The plot is the hook to hang your hat on, with the hat being as many laughs as we can fit into an hour and 40 minutes."

The Play What I Wrote shows at The Rep, Birmingham, from Sat 27 November to Sat 1 January, and then at Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, from Mon 24 to Sat 29 January.



Bedknobs And Broomsticks

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Wed 10 - Sun 14 November;
Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 5 - Sat 9 April

Based on the 1971 Disney kids' film of the same name and set in the darkest days of the Second World War, *Bedknobs And Broomsticks* tells the story of the Rawlins siblings, three children who've been evacuated from London. Finding themselves in the fictional Dorset town of Pepperinge Eye, they are put in the care of the eccentric Miss Eglantine Price - a woman who's far more interested in completing her studies in

magic than in taking care of a trio of young evacuees.

Before the children know it, she's casting spells on their bed and sending them skywards on a magical adventure...

"Using fantasy to bring respite from trauma is really timely," says the show's co-producer, Candice Edmunds. "It feels more than ever that we want something to lift us out of the situation caused by the pandemic. In the story, the war means that the Rawlins children are in the depths of a traumatic upheaval; fantasy offers some relief from the dark forces closing in around them. It's very cleverly written to show the way a small child would imagine solutions to problems."

Alice In Wonderland

The Old Rep, Birmingham,
Sat 20 November - Fri 17 December

A timeless classic telling the magical and decidedly topsy-turvy story of a little girl who disappears down a rabbit hole and discovers a weird world, *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* first made its way onto the stage during its author Lewis Carroll's lifetime; in 1886, to be precise. It's since been adapted for the theatre countless times and in all manner of ways, including as a ballet, a musical, an opera and a traditional pantomime. With its cast of nonsensical and amusing characters, including the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, it invariably makes for a great Christmas show. This Old Rep production is presented in association with Birmingham Ormiston Academy (BOA).

First Time

Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, Thurs 4
November; Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Sat 6
November

"I think there's humour hidden in even the darkest of places, and you're never too far from a laugh in *First Time*," says Nathaniel Hall of his autobiographical show about contracting HIV at the age of 16. "It also has fabulous storytelling, some bad drag, audience participation and moments of quiet reflection, but it ends in a really hopeful place. No one will go away feeling too emotionally drained afterwards because it's really important to me that my audience has a space in which to feel positive about the future. Although my story is predominantly a



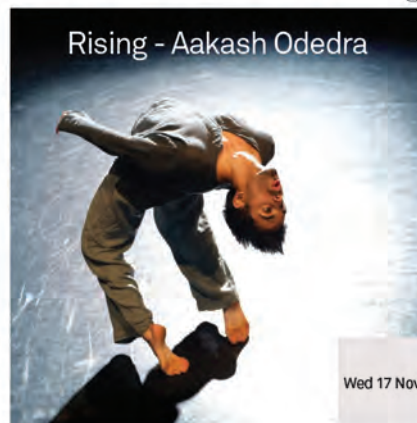
HIV-plus gay man's story, the show is universal in many other ways."

Beauty And The Beast

New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme,
Fri 26 November - Sat 29 January

When a young woman is captured by a hideous beast, she finds herself facing a life of isolation in his mysterious palace. The Beast, too, is trapped - seemingly forever - inside the grotesqueness of his physical appearance, the consequence of a spell cast upon him by an evil witch. Only Beauty's ability to look beyond his ugliness and see the person within can save him...

This latest version of the much-loved fairytale is adapted and helmed by New Vic Artistic Director Theresa Heskins.





Waitress The Musical

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Mon 29 November - Sat 4 December; Birmingham Hippodrome, Mon 16 - Sat 21 May; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 28 June - Sat 2 July

This smash-hit Broadway and West End musical is based on the 2007 movie of the same name and is billed as a musical celebration of friendship, motherhood, and the magic of a well-made pie. Expert pie maker Jenna is trapped in a loveless marriage to a controlling and abusive man and dreams of a better future. When a baking contest in a nearby county - and the town's new doctor - provide her with the hope of something better, she has to decide whether she can find the strength and courage to rebuild her life. The challenge she faces becomes even harder when her husband discovers the cash she's been squirreling away with the intention of leaving him.

West End star Lucie Jones leads the casting at Stoke's Regent Theatre and is replaced by Chelsea Halfpenny for the Birmingham and Wolverhampton dates.

What's New Pussycat?

The REP, Birmingham, until Sun 14 November

Swinging London of the 1960s and the music of Sir Tom Jones provide the backdrop to this brand-new musical, a lively adaptation of Henry Fielding's influential 18th-century novel, *The History Of Tom Jones: The Foundling*.



The storyline sees Tom rocking up in London with a broken heart but nevertheless full of ambition and boasting a booming voice. He soon encounters an exciting world of dancing, mods, miniskirts and great music - but his one burning question remains unanswered: will he ever be reunited with his true love (who seems way too preoccupied with designing for Carnaby Street to contemplate taking a walk down the aisle)?...

The show is choreographed by Arlene Phillips.

Rock Of Ages

Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Tues 2 - Sat 6 November; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Tues 29 March - Sat 2 April

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*. Strictly's Kevin Clifton stars as Stacey Jaxx.

The Magician's Elephant

Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, until Sat 1 January

Combining fun and fantasy, *The Magician's Elephant* is set in the fantastical town of Baltese, a place where nothing out of the ordinary ever happens...

Until, that is, a magician one day conjures an elephant out of the sky...

This Royal Shakespeare Company production, based on Kate DiCamillo's prize-winning novel of the same name, sees West End favourite Summer Strallen displaying her dark side as

the Countess Quintet.

"It takes this magical moment to occur for Baltese to come to life," explains Summer. "It gives the people of the town a licence to express themselves and have faith that there might be something else out there. I have great respect for the omnipresent, so to speak, and that's what this story is all about. If you have a bit of faith in something, and you all work together, you can actually, potentially, make things happen."

9 to 5 The Musical

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Tues 16 - Sat 20 November; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Tues 22 - Sat 26 February

"I'm so excited that 9 To 5 is heading to the Midlands," says Dolly Parton in talking about her hit musical's visit to the second city. "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 turn the tables on their sexist and egotistical bigot of a boss.... Louise Redknapp stars.



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Theatre previews from around the region



Groan Ups

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Mon 8 - Sat 13 November

"We wanted to see if we could do a show where we kept the audience laughing all the way through but which also put character at the centre of the production," explains Mischief Theatre's Henry Lewis in talking about *Groan Ups*, a brand-new comedy about growing up. "We thought it would be fun to explore five people at different stages of their lives and tell a story that was funny but also moving."

"Essentially this is a show that asks questions like, do we choose who we become? Is the story of our lives already written? Do we ever really grow up? We try to provide some answers by following an unruly classroom of six year-olds on their journey through anarchic high-school teenage years to the challenges of adulthood. This is a lesson not to be skipped!"

The Legend Of Sleepy Hollow

Malvern Theatres, Tues 2 - Sat 6 November



Perhaps best known from the 1999 Tim Burton film version starring Johnny Depp, *The Legend Of Sleepy Hollow* did in fact start life as a short story. Published in 1819, it was authored by American writer Washington Irving, who wrote it while living here in the Midlands - in Birmingham. His other famous story, *Rip Van Winkle*, was also written during his time in Brum. Coronation Street favourites Wendi Peters and Bill Ward take top billing in this gothic yarn of old wives' tales, dangerous mysteries and headless horsemen.

Phoebe Francis Brown: The Glad Game

Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham, Sun 14 November

Finding oneself in the bleakest of times and discovering gladness in the saddest of

situations is the subject of this hour-long show by Phoebe Francis Brown, a Midlands-born actor who, three years ago, was diagnosed with an incurable cancer in the area of her brain that controls speech, language and memory.

"The Glad Game aims to debunk some of the myths around what life is like for people - particularly young people - living with cancer," explains Phoebe. "It's about a life lived with cancer but also about creating the life you want in the most difficult of circumstances."

The Glad Game is being presented as part of arts & mental-health festival Bedlam.



A Christmas Carol

The Old Rep, Birmingham, Thurs 4 - Sat 6 November

Of all Charles Dickens' festive stories, *A Christmas Carol* reigns supreme. The covetous sinning of the miserly Scrooge, the eternal hope offered by Tiny Tim, and the eerie visions of redemption - visiting Ebenezer in the shape of three seasonal

ghosts - all combine to give the tale a real 'olde worlde' charm.

This particular production, presented by the Dickens Theatre Company, sees two actors taking on the challenge of portraying more than 30 characters.



The Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde

Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa, Mon 15 & Tues 16 November; Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, Mon 22 - Wed 24 November; Albany Theatre, Coventry, Mon 7 - Tues 8 February; Swan Theatre, Worcester, Mon 1 - Tues 2 March; Lichfield Garrick, Wed 23 - Thur 24 March

Dr Jekyll is not himself!

Robert Louis Stevenson's classic gothic novella tells the tale of a brilliant but obsessive scientist whose sadistic alter-ego wreaks havoc across Victorian London. This dark and twisted tale of love, redemption and the seductive power of evil is here presented by Blackeyed Theatre in association with South Hill Park.



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Theatre previews from around the region



Death Drop

The Alexandra, Birmingham,
Tues 23 - Sat 27 November

If you like your spiningling murder-mysteries liberally festooned with raucous ridiculousness and outrageous drag stars, then this is the show for you. Although the premise is a familiar one - a group of guests gather for a dinner party in a remote location (in this case, a stately home on a mysterious island), what follows is anything but predictable, as the seriously-over-the-top drag legends strut their garish stuff and sashay away with gay abandon. Expect witty one-liners, breathtaking costumes, grisly murders and madcap mayhem aplenty in this camp-as-Christmas comedy starring Ru Paul US drag legends Willam and Ra'Jah O'Hara. Drag Race UK favourite Vinegar Strokes also features, as does Drag Race Down Under personality Karen From Finance and cabaret host Holly Stars.

Handbagged

Stafford Gatehouse Theatre,
Tues 2 - Sat 6 November

An Olivier Award nominee in the Best New Comedy category, Handbagged speculates about the relationship between Her Majesty The Queen and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, two powerful and iconic women who were born in the same year. But what did the pair really talk about behind closed palace doors?

The play was written by Moira Buffini in 2010 and described by the Metro as 'a mischievous pleasure, with the sharp teeth of a kicked corgi'. Originally intended to be a one-act show, Buffini expanded it in 2013, since which time it's garnered plenty of praise from theatre critics and audiences alike.

La Voix

Tamworth Assembly Rooms, Fri 19 November;
The Old Rep, Birmingham, Sat 5 February;
Swan Theatre, Worcester, Fri 11 February

You know you've hit the big time when stellar showbiz names deign to have an opinion about you - and if it's a positive one, so much the better!

Such is the situation in which La Voix now finds herself, with celebrity royalty in the



shape of Sir Ian McKellen and Dawn French both waxing lyrical about her. The one-time Britain's Got Talent semi-finalist has been playing the cabaret circuit for all she's worth these last few years, picking up plaudits - and devoted fans - like they're going out of fashion.

As her stage name suggests, she's an impressive vocalist, but she's also a talented impersonator and biting funny comedian: past routines have seen her explaining that the only difference between performing as Shirley Bassey and Tina Turner is that when she's impersonating Tina, she leaves the coat hanger in her dress and holds a football between her legs!

Eric & Ern

Lichfield Garrick, Thurs 4 November

This homage to the UK's best-loved double-act features some of the duo's most famous routines, songs and sketches, not to mention the compulsory musical guest. So if you're of a certain vintage and would like to be reminded of nostalgic 1970s' family Christmases spent gathered around the goggle-box while Eric & Ernie made you laugh, this is definitely the show for you.



Dirty Dusting

Lichfield Garrick, Fri 5 & Sat 6 November;
Stafford Gatehouse Theatre, Wed 12 January;
The Place, Telford, Tues 18 January;
Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Fri 21 January



When overzealous office manager Dave decides to put his cleaners, Gladys, Elsie and Olive, out to pasture, the three women wonder how they're ever going to make ends meet. Until, that is, they have the brilliant idea of setting up The Telephone Belles - 'a dirty-sex chatline that really cleans up'!

Delivered

Old Joint Stock Theatre, Birmingham,
Fri 19 - Sun 21 November

Lisa MacGregor's dark new comedy follows the journey of liver-transplant patient Tabitha as she tries to track down the organ-donor family who saved her life.

A co-production created by theatre companies Old Joint Stock and Town & Gown, MacGregor's debut play has been inspired by her own family's liver-transplant journey.

FROM THE RUMBA TO ROCK'N'ROLL...

Kevin Clifton stars in Rock Of Ages



Former Strictly dance favourite Kevin Clifton talks about taking on the challenge of playing arrogant and self-obsessed rock star Stacee Jaxx in Rock Of Ages, the hit West End musical which is this month stopping off in Stoke-on-Trent...

What made you want to be involved with Rock of Ages, Kevin?

I first saw the show in 2009 on Broadway, when I was in New York with Burn The Floor. Rock Of Ages was on the next street over. I just loved it and went back and saw it two or three more times on Broadway. Then I saw it again when it came to the West End. I'm a big fan! I've always been a massive rock fan anyway, and before I was on Strictly I used to fancy myself a bit of a rock star. I used to have long black hair and eye makeup and black fingernails and used to swan about thinking I was the Jim Morrison of the ballroom! To be part of the show a few years ago was a blast, so I'm really excited to be back playing Stacee Jaxx!

Could you tell us a little about the show?

It's the story of two wannabes who've headed to California to make it as stars, all told with the help of amazing '80s power rock songs. Drew wants to become a rock star, and Sherrie wants to become an actress. They both end up working at this bar, waiting tables and falling in love. However, in walks this guy Stacee Jaxx, who is the front man of a rock band. He's the flamboyant, over-the-top megastar that all the girls want to be with and all the men want to be, but at the same time he's a bit of a villain - he's pretentious and self-obsessed, thinking he's God's gift to everything, and ultimately he disrupts everyone else's lives!

Is it fun playing someone a bit villainous?

Oh yeah. I can definitely tap into the pretentious nature of him - I think I used to be a bit like that, thinking I was a rock star when I was just a ballroom dancer. Everyone goes through that sort of phase a bit, though! I used to think I was really rock'n'roll when in fact I'm the least rock'n'roll person in the world! It's a lot of fun to play Stacee, as he's so different to how I am and how people are used to seeing me. Although, having said that, Rock Of Ages is just as flamboyant as Strictly, and has the same sense of fun, although in a different way!

Do you have a favourite song you look forward to performing in the show?

My first big song is Bon Jovi's Dead Or Alive.

That's Stacee's big moment, and I love that song. It's his big opening in the show, and you've really got to come on and make a massive impact with the audience, really get them going and show what kind of character Stacee is. It should be fun!

What are the challenges of performing this style of music?

I've spent a lot of time learning how to breathe differently as a singer than I do as a dancer. As dancers we take shallow, short bursts of air as we move, whereas when you're singing and hitting these big notes you want to take in large amounts of air quite quickly and from quite low down. I'm training myself to be more conscious of my breathing and getting used to it. Otherwise I might run out of breath on stage! You don't realise all these things until you start learning about them. It's not just a case of thinking I can hold a tune therefore I can do a musical - there's much more to it than that.

What was your first experience of musical theatre?

One of my earliest memories is me and my sister sat in front of the TV watching Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. We used to get the fire guard from the fireplace and put it in front of us, pretending it was the car. We would sit there, one behind the other, singing! We used to get my dad's snooker cue out of the garage and do Me Ol' Bamboo! When we were really young we came down to London to watch Cats, and I remember being so blown away by the whole spectacle of it all. I remember sitting there and thinking, this is amazing. Mum and Dad bought us the soundtrack on cassette, and I used to sit and listen to it all the time.

Do you have a role you'd love to play in the future?

I don't know specifically - I think this is it, being Stacee Jaxx! Like I say, Rock Of Ages is my favourite show. It's just so much fun, and you have such a good time when you watch it. I've been a little bit obsessed with it for a few years, so when they asked me about playing Stacee, I thought, 'Perfect, I'm going to be able to be in a show I love!'

You've toured before with various shows - is it something you enjoy, or do you find it a challenge?

I love it, actually. I don't have a problem with tour life - I quite enjoy it and find it exciting. When you're on tour with a cast, you really get to know them and you build a sense of family. It all feels like a bit of an adventure.

Do you have any 'must-have' items you take with you?

My podcast app on my phone. I'm constantly listening to podcasts - lots of motivational ones. My iPad too, so I can catch up on Match Of The Day and stuff!

Do you have a go-to karaoke tune?

Are You Gonna Be My Girl? by Jet. I love doing that at karaoke, but I used to really scream it out and not be able to talk afterwards!

Have you ever been given a piece of advice, or some words of wisdom, that have stuck with you?

I can't remember who said it to me, but I took it on board: "It's not about doing nothing wrong, it's about doing something magical". I think people make the mistake of thinking that to produce a good performance they've got to be technically perfect, but there are some brilliant performers who can hold a crowd in the palm of their hands without necessarily being the best dancers, singers or actors. They can create magic and make people feel something.

Finally, what can audiences expect when they come to see you in Rock Of Ages?

Don't expect 'Kevin from Grimsby', as they call me on Strictly Come Dancing! It's me in a completely different light, probably being a bit raunchier than you're used to! I'm going to look completely different, but it will be a lot of fun and you should expect to have an amazing time.

Kevin stars as Stacee Jaxx in Rock Of Ages at Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, from Tuesday 2 to Saturday 6 November



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Peppa Pig's Best Day Ever

Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Wed 3 & Thurs 4 November; Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Sat 12 & Sun 13 February; Palace Theatre, Redditch, Tues 19 & Wed 20 July; Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Fri 19 & Sat 20 August; Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, Wed 7 & Thurs 8 September; The Place, Telford, Sat 8 & Sun 9 October

If you've taken your little ones to any of the previous Peppa Pig stage shows - and enjoyed the experience of watching them having a fantastic time - you'll already know that this latest production is well worth catching. Peppa Pig is heading out on a road trip with George, Mummy Pig and Daddy Pig, and there are plenty of adventures waiting to be had - including ones that involve dragons, dinosaurs, ice creams and muddy puddles...

Horrible Histories: Barmy Britain

The Alexandra, Birmingham, Wed 1 - Sat 4 December

If you love the Horrible Histories series - and why the heck wouldn't you?! - then Barmy Britain is a show well worth catching. Alongside providing answers to such searching questions as 'what would happen if a Viking moved in next door?' and 'would you stand and deliver to dastardly Dick Turpin?', the show also invites its audience to escape the clutches of Burke and Hare, move to the groove with the partying Queen Victoria and prepare to do battle in the First World War.

In short, and as its publicity says, it's 'a truly horrible history of Britain - with all the nasty bits left in!'

Shlomo's Beatbox Adventure For Kids

Birmingham Town Hall, Sun 7 November

SK Shlomo brings his hit show to town this month - and there's nothing more certain than that ticket-holding youngsters across the region will be eagerly anticipating the hour of pure beatboxing magic that he'll undoubtedly be serving up.

As well as offering a potted history of the discipline, Shlomo explains how to avoid passing out from oxygen deprivation while putting together phrases, and invites



members of the audience to take part in a beatbox face-off. There's plenty of opportunity to gasp in awe and wonder at the man's breathtaking talent, too - something which is sure to leave the adults in the audience every bit as flabbergasted as their kids!

How The Koala Learnt To Hug

Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, Sat 6 November

This off-the-wall family musical, based on the best-selling book by Steven Lee, has been widely praised for providing youngsters with a great introduction to theatre. Karen The Koala heads a cast of wild characters who present a show that not only celebrates the magic of family but also the importance of a nice warm hug!

The Smeds And The Smoos

The Albany Theatre, Coventry, Fri 3 - Sat 4 November; Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa, Sat 6 & Sun 7 November

Another Tall Stories adaptation of a picture book by award-winning collaborators Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, The Smeds And The Smoos tells the intergalactic tale of a young Smed and a young Smoo who fall hopelessly in love. Problem is... the red-coloured Smeds and the blue-coloured Smoos never mix, causing Romeo & Juliet-style complications for the star-crossed lovers... Created for children aged three-plus, this theatrical presentation of Donaldson and

Scheffler's delightful space romance comes complete with a powerful but gently conveyed message about difference and tolerance.

Stick Man

The Core, Solihull, Sat 13 November; Birmingham Town Hall, Sun 26 December - Sun 9 January

Featuring a trio of talented performers, Freckle Productions' 50-minute adaptation of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's ever-popular picture book brings together puppetry, songs, live music and 'funky moves'...

Suitable for children aged three and older.



Big Red Bath

Brewhouse Arts Centre, Burton-upon-Trent, Sat 6 November

Adapted from Julia Jarman and Adrian Reynolds' popular children's picture book of the same name, this Edinburgh Fringe hit blends music, song and character-based performances to tell the story of Ben and Bella's bathtime fun with a host of animals. Fingers crossed Hippopotamus isn't too big to fit in the tub!...

Suitable for children aged three and older.

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Pantos opening across the region in November



Beauty And The Beast

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Wed 24 November - Sat 8 January

Panto legend Iain Lauchlan has been involved in the production of numerous Belgrade pantomimes down the years - but he's in no doubt about which one is his favourite...

"I enjoy all of them," says Iain, who writes and stars in the shows, "but if I had to choose, I think it would be our Beauty And The Beast."

It was a challenge when we did it the first time. 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.

"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."

All New Adventures Of Peter Pan

Lichfield Garrick, Thurs 25 November - Sun 2 January



Fly away to Neverland with the boy who wouldn't grow up, meet a real fairy, marvellous mermaids, wonderful Wendy and the down-on-their-luck lost boys. Oh, and beware the ever-so-wicked Captain Hook and a very hungry crocodile who goes tick-tock

(he swallowed a clock!).

This festive-season version of the JM Barrie classic stars Garrick panto favourite Sam Rabone, who's this year taking on the role of Mrs Smee. Sam has also directed the show.

Aladdin

Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham, Wed 24 November - Sat 11 December

Flying carpets at the ready, boys and girls... A perfect story for an evening of family entertainment finds street youth Aladdin trying against all odds to win the hand of the beautiful princess - and being helped in his endeavours by the mystical genie of the lamp...

King Arthur: The Panto

Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury, Sat 27 November - Fri 31 December

The Roses Theatre really is pulling out all the

stops with its Christmas show this year, promising a production that's replete with princesses, heroes, villains, dragons, wizards, magic, music, brave knights, foolish jesters, stones and, er, scones!

Set in Medieval Tewkesbury and recounting the story of a humble baker boy who's destined for great things, King Arthur: The Panto has been co-written - along with Nick Wilkes - by BAFTA-winning Birds Of A Feather writer Maurice Gran.





One Snowy Night

Percy & friends get festive at MAC

Slot Machine Theatre this month returns to Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) with another festive offering: an adaptation of Nick Butterworth's classic Percy The Park Keeper story, One Snowy Night. We caught up with two of the company's three artistic directors, Nick Tigg and Nicola Blackwell, to chat about the latest show - and their intention to make it snow at MAC!...

What makes One Snowy Night such a great festive show?

Nicola: The Percy The Park Keeper books are so well loved. The illustrations are just gorgeous, and it's a really simple, understandable tale. It's about a really kind and elderly park keeper who's friends with all the animals. One night it snows in the park, so one by one the animals knock on his door and squash into the hut to keep warm. Then a certain amount of chaos ensues.

Nick: At this point in time, shows are often taking on a whole new meaning to what they did two years ago. People wanting to get together and celebrate looking after each other is a really big thing at the moment, and that's exactly what One Snowy Night is about.

Talking of those beautiful illustrations, how have you brought them alive on stage?

Nicola: When we first did One Snowy Night about 12 years ago, we worked really closely with Nick Butterworth to get the whole play as close to the original as possible. I designed the costumes and props while literally just referring to the book, alongside all the other Park Keeper books. We tried to reference ridiculously minute details, too.

Nick: For example, one day I was trying to construct the little noticeboard you see in Percy's hut. On it there's some really bizarre stuff, like a letter from Prince Charles and a conker on a string. What you really have to consider, though, is how to turn 15-ish pages of a book into 50 minutes of stage time. You have to expand on what's there, but at the same time you want kids to be able to recognise every single frame from the book, right there in front of them. We're absolutely fanatical about it. Many children have no

qualms about saying that they see something they don't like or which doesn't match the book. There's no escape!

What makes Slot Machine Theatre stand out from the crowd?

Nicola: We have a thing about having really high-quality music in our shows, so the tracks are really complex and often quite a big sing for people. Nick gets in some really top-quality session musicians to record some of the material, which is quite different to how a lot of companies at our relatively modest scale work. A lot of time and effort gets put into the composition and mixing, so our soundtracks do add huge production value.

Nick: People are perfectly happy to play Mozart to their baby while it's in the womb, or have it listen to all the music they listen to on a daily basis, but the moment they're born, it's all about The Wheels On The Bus. Children should be treated with respect for their intelligence, and great music is a part of that.

What's the best thing about putting on family shows?

Nicola: There's nothing better than seeing so many generations sitting side by side in the theatre. Also, seeing the reactions of children who wouldn't usually be able to go to the theatre is amazing. Accessibility is really important to us, so we need to make it funny and have simple songs, without being patronising or uninteresting. If English isn't someone's first language, for example, or a child is still very, very young and struggling with language, then we still want them to go away from our shows with an understanding of the story and having enjoyed it. That's key for us.

Nick: There are sections of physical comedy in our adaptations, where we do something very silly and then keep doing it and doing it, but children find it funnier and funnier.

Every performance of Kipper the last time we were at MAC had at least one kid in total hysterics at one point or another at some deliberately stupid part of the show. Equally, parents and grandparents can't be surrounded by all those laughing kids without joining in to some extent too, so it has a wonderful ricochet effect.

Nicola: This is such a feelgood story in general, so I hope people leave with that indescribable warm, fuzzy feeling that you get when you've just really enjoyed a show.

Nick: We do try to do things that are quite magical in our shows, like making it snow in the theatre so the kids can't quite figure out where it's come from. Yes, spoiler alert, it will snow in Cannon Hill Park this year, regardless of the actual weather! To have it snow inside is really mind-blowing for a lot of young people, and you can really hear them getting excited about it.

Nicola: They also have a thing for glitter balls! There's always a massive gasp when we get it out, even though they're such an easy effect. It's always really sweet!

Nick: To show a young person that the theatre can be a truly fun experience - and one they'll want to repeat - is so magical and rewarding.

.....

One Snowy Night shows at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, from Tuesday 16 November to Tuesday 28 December. For ticket prices and to book, visit: macbirmingham.co.uk

BIRMINGHAM

A ballerina in a yellow tutu is holding a large nutcracker. She is standing next to a Christmas tree decorated with red and gold ornaments. At the base of the tree are several wrapped gifts in red, gold, and white. The background is a dark blue night sky with stars and snow-covered trees.

Director Carlos Acosta

The Nutcracker

20 November –
11 December

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ROYAL BALLET

Karla Doorbar as Clara, © Richard Battye



Birmingham Royal Ballet: The Nutcracker

Birmingham Hippodrome,
Sat 20 November - Sat 11 December

Birmingham Royal Ballet here presents an exclusive adaptation of Sir David Bintley's Royal Albert Hall production of The Nutcracker.

Never before performed outside London, the show replaces - for one year only - the Peter Wright version which BRB traditionally presents pre-Christmas.

Sir Peter's production is currently undergoing a major renovation, but his choreography features in this 2017 version, as do the splendid costumes of John Macfarlane. Much-loved actor Simon Callow also contributes, albeit in voice only, as the magician Drosselmeyer, while the show's usual highlights - from Tchaikovsky's sumptuous score to the impressive and magically growing Christmas tree - are all present and correct, too.

The Midnight Bell

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry,
Wed 10 - Sat 13 November

The man who inspired The Midnight Bell - Sir Matthew Bourne's latest dance production - was Patrick Hamilton, an early-20th-century author of plays (including *Rope* and *Gas Light*) and darkly comic novels.

When he wasn't busy writing, Hamilton spent considerable periods of time sitting in London pubs drinking himself into a stupor, soaking up the atmosphere, listening to other customer's tales and anecdotes, and finding inspiration for the stories he would then go away and create.

Bourne was attracted to the version of London

which Hamilton conjured in his hugely underrated novels; a version that rejected, as Bourne describes it, 'the Noel Coward-ish world of elegant women in silk dresses and cocktails', in favour of something darker, edgier and altogether more working class.

Featuring characters from across Hamilton's novels, *The Midnight Bell* interweaves stories to create what Bourne's company, New Adventures, describes as 'bitter comedies of longing, frustration, betrayal and redemption'.

"There is a bit of humour," Bourne told London's *Evening Standard*, "but this is about sad, lonely people with not great outcomes to their stories... Maybe the next show will be a bit more uplifting."



Rising: Aakash Odedra

Patrick Studio, Birmingham Hippodrome,
Wed 17 November

British South Asian dance star Aakash Odedra made a significant splash when he first appeared on the scene, quickly racking up collaborations with numerous high-profile choreographers, including Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi and Russell Maliphant.

Now a Hippodrome associate artist, Aakash here presents a show created a decade ago and featuring choreography by all of the aforementioned, as well as by himself. Critically acclaimed when it debuted in 2011, *Rising* has since been performed in excess of 200 times and was described by the *Guardian* as 'the dance equivalent of a red-carpet event'.





BRING IT ON!

**Amber Davies talks
about taking the lead
in the smash-hit
Broadway musical...**

Amber Davies' star is definitely in the ascendent. Winning the third series of Love Island in 2017 catapulted the girl from North Wales into the full glare of the spotlight. In the years which have followed, she's launched her own boutique clothing range and participated in numerous celebrity-focused TV shows.

But no matter how exciting life became post-Love Island, Amber's ultimate goal was always to become an actor - it was what she'd spent her childhood and subsequent years at London's Urdang Academy preparing to do.

In 2019 she got her second big break, starring as Judy Burnley in Dolly Parton's 9 to 5 The Musical, a role which earned her plenty of critical acclaim.

Now she's about to make her Midlands debut in another big role, playing cheerleader queen Campbell Davis in Bring It On The Musical, which stops off at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre in January.

Written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Jeff Whitty and Tom Kitt, the hit Broadway show centres on Campbell's journey from squad captain at Truman High School, through an unhappy move to the cheerleading-bereft Jackson High, to her ultimate return to a life of high kicks and pom-pom twirling. It's a role which the affably self-assured Amber is relishing playing, particularly as she previously played Campbell in an Urdang Academy production.

"I see my young self in Campbell," says Amber. "She's a bright, motivated woman and she knows her worth. She knows her talent, and although she has some obstacles come her way, she manages to overcome them and learn what's actually important in life. She goes on such an amazing journey in the show - both emotionally and physically. She knows when to be the team leader but she also knows when to be a friend, and I think that's super important. One of the biggest lessons she learns is that it's not always about winning. For me personally, it's not always about getting that job, it's about enjoying the journey - and the little moments in life as well, because they are just as important as the big things."

Playing opposite Amber in the role of Cameron is retired British gymnast Louis Smith. The pair, together with the rest of the cast, are about to undergo a five-week camp where they'll learn the basics (and tricks) of cheerleading; enough to convince audiences, anyway.

Bring It On is a very physical, high-octane show that requires a lot of stamina from its cast, who will be required to do eight performances a week. This is something which excites rather than fazes Amber: "It's a lot more fun than it is daunting. Because it's so intense, your body naturally gets used to it. I did some really hard years of training and find I go into muscle memory. I feel I can get through it all a lot easier now than I would have done when I was in college. And of course there are things in life you can do to help yourself. I won't be going out after a show and I won't be drinking alcohol. I will be doing the necessary things to protect my voice and my body. Other than that, if you love the job then you'll get through every day. The buzz the audience gives you, and the adrenaline you get after every show, makes all the hard work worthwhile."

Amber's story is one to inspire others who dream of a life on the stage. Dancing, singing and acting lessons as a child, followed by all her hard work at Urdang, has certainly paid off. Taking nothing for granted, she is very aware of the fickle nature of the industry and its many pitfalls. Like everyone in the profession, she's experienced rejection but has never once let it dampen her ambition.

Her 'golden ticket' came with 9 To 5 The Musical...

"When I came out of the reality world, I realised there was something missing in my life. I'd always worked so hard to become a performer and knew I needed to make a decision. The role of Judy in 9 To 5 came up and I thought, 'Oh my God, this is perfect'. Judy was actually meant to be an older woman, and I was a little concerned as to how it would work. Anyway, I went for it and it was just the most amazing experience - and they actually wrote her into the show as a younger woman. It was a dream. I couldn't

believe it was happening to me. Initially I was very anxious but soon realised there was nothing to be scared about. Doing 9 To 5 was one of the best years of my life."

Playing in Dolly Parton's musical is one thing but actually coming face-to-face with her is quite another... Amber travelled to Nashville to meet the country-music icon for Amber Meets Dolly - a fly-on-the-wall show commissioned by ITVBe to follow her in her pursuit of West End stardom.

"I was fortunate enough to meet Dolly twice. They flew me to Nashville, where I interviewed her for the show. I've never been so nervous in all my life, but I don't know why because she was the most humble woman. She really cared about me and how I felt about playing the role.

"Then, on opening night, I interviewed her again, and she was so excited to see me - asking how rehearsals had gone etc... Then I got this gorgeous letter from her after our press night saying she was so proud of us all, and that Jane Fonda - I was playing Jane's character in the film - was so proud of what I'd done with the role. It was a dream come true."

So what one piece of advice would Amber give to anybody wanting to follow in her footsteps?

"There's one mantra I go by in general and that is: 'the most successful people in the world are those who have rejection after rejection but never lose their motivation'. I was told that years ago, and it has rung in my head every single day since. We can get het up in comparing ourselves to others, especially on social media when you see people getting jobs and you're wondering why you aren't. But even after those rejections you just have to stay motivated because that's when things will start paying off..."

.....

Bring It On The Musical shows at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre from Wed 26 to Sat 29 January, and then at The Alexandra, Birmingham, from Tues 10 to Sat 14 May



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Films released in November...

Spencer CERT 12a (117mins)

Starring **Kristen Stewart, Timothy Spall, Jack Nielen, Freddie Spry, Jack Farthing, Stella Gonet, Richard Sammel** Directed by **Pablo Larrain**

Chilean director Pablo Larrain is the latest filmmaker to tackle that most revelatory and revealing of periods in the modern-day history of the royal family - namely, the Diana years.

Billed as 'a fable from a true tragedy', *Spencer* finds Kristen Stewart in monumental form as the troubled and coquettish Diana. She is ably assisted in the presentation of an utterly spellbinding yarn by an exceptional Timothy Spall, who takes on the role of the Queen Mother's equerry, Major Alistair Gregory. With Diana's ever-spiralling waywardness threatening to undermine the monarchy even further, the Major is drafted in to steer the People's Princess back onto the straight and narrow.

The action unfolds across three festive-season days at Sandringham in 1991, as the royals attempt a last-ditch patch-up job on Charles' badly misfiring union with Di. But it soon becomes painfully apparent that any hope of a happier future for the king-in-waiting and his wife of 10 years has long since left the building...

Released Fri 5 November



Eternals CERT tbc (157 mins)

Starring **Gemma Chan, Richard Madden, Kumail Nanjiani, Lia McHugh, Brian Tyree Henry, Lauren Ridloff, Barry Keoghan, Don Lee, Kit Harrington, Salma Hayek, Angelina Jolie** Directed by **Chloé Zhao**

Immortal beings the Eternals square up to their traditional adversaries the Deviants in this latest, and 26th, entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Featuring Angelina Jolie as a goddess-like Eternal named Thena, the movie is noteworthy for showcasing Marvel's first-ever big-screen queer couple.

The film is helmed by Chloe Zhao, who earlier this year picked up the coveted best director Oscar for 'best film' *Nomadland*.

Released Fri 5 November



Shepherd CERT 15 (103 mins)

Starring **Tom Hughes, Greta Scacchi, Kate Dickie, Gaia Weiss, Jamie Marie Leary** Directed by **Russell Owen**



Director Russell Owen pumps up the volume in this gothic chiller of a post-Halloween horror movie that comes complete with plenty of things that go bump in the night. Traumatized by the car-accident death of a pregnant wife he knows had been unfaithful to him, and having aborted a suicide attempt and been rejected by his monstrous Bible-basher of a mother, Eric Black takes a job as a shepherd on a remote island. But if the psychologically tortured Eric is hoping his self-imposed isolation will grant him some much-needed peace of mind, he's definitely selected the wrong *seemingly uninhabited* place in which to get away from it all...

Released Fri 5 November

The Card Counter CERT tbc

Starring **Oscar Isaac, Tiffany Haddish, Tye Sheridan, Willem Dafoe, Alexander Babara, Bobby C King** Directed by **Paul Schrader**

When dead-eyed gambler and former serviceman William Tell happens across an angry and excitable young man named Cirk, he finds his life taking an unexpected and somewhat ludicrous turn. Cirk is out for revenge against a military colonel and he thinks he may well have found a willing collaborator in Tell. Purchasing a tranquilliser gun and poisoned darts online, the pair hatch a plan - but not everything goes as smoothly as they'd hoped...

Released Fri 5 November



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Films released in November...

House Of Gucci CERT tbc

Starring Adam Driver, Lady Gaga, Salma Hayek, Jeremy Irons, Al Pacino, Jared Leto, Jack Huston
Directed by Ridley Scott

A star-studded cast directed by Ridley Scott bring to the screen the tragic and true-life tale of Maurizio Gucci, the heir to Guccio Gucci's famous fashion house.

Marrying Patrizia Reggiani in 1973, Maurizio traded her in for a younger model some 12 years later. It was a move that didn't sit well with Patrizia, to say the least. A decade later, Maurizio met his fate at the hands of a hired hitman, with Patrizia - who subsequently became known as 'the Black Widow' - finding herself on trial for allegedly doing the hiring. The film is based on Sara Gay Forden's book *The House Of Gucci: A Sensational Story Of Murder, Madness, Glamour, And Greed*.

Released Fri 26 November



Cry Macho CERT tbc (104 mins)

Starring Clint Eastwood, Dwight Yoakam, Daniel V Graulau, Amber Lynn Ashley, Brytnee Ratledge, Alexandra Ruddy
Directed by Clint Eastwood



Ex-rodeo star Mike Milo is hired by his former boss Howard Polk to travel to Mexico City in search of Howard's 13-year-old son, and when he finds him, to bring him across the border into the United States...

Ninety-one-year-old Clint Eastwood's latest movie has received a mixed response from the critics and underperformed at the box office, with many feeling that it's maybe too similar to previous Eastwood projects *Gran Torino* and *The Mule*. That said, it does offer a chance to see Clint in a cowboy hat, riding on a horse, so what's not to like?

Released Fri 12 November

Belfast CERT 12a (98 mins)

Starring Jamie Dornan, Caitriona Balfe, Ciarán Hinds, Judi Dench, Colin Morgan, Lara McDonnell
Directed by Kenneth Branagh

With Kenneth Branagh at the helm, Van Morrison contributing the soundtrack and Judi Dench bringing her trademark quality to proceedings, *Belfast* has got plenty going for it - even before you check out the four- and five-star reviews.

Branagh's love letter to his own past, filmed in black-and-white, features Jamie Dornan as a carpenter in debt to the taxman and - with the Troubles kicking off - in need of a brand-new start away from his suddenly war-torn home city.

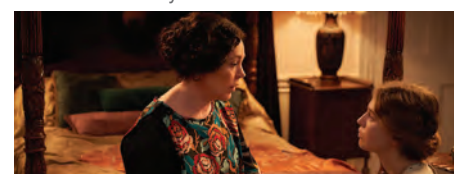
Newcomer Jude Hill hits the ground running as Dornan's young son, Buddy.

Released Fri 12 November



Mothering Sunday CERT 15 (104 mins)

Starring Olivia Colman, Josh O'Connor, Colin Firth, Odessa Young, Glenda Jackson, Sope Dirisu
Directed by Eva Husson



With the Great War having claimed so many young middle-class men, survivor Paul Sheringham carries the entire weight of his family's expectations on his shoulders. And their aspirations for him most certainly *do not* include sexual liaisons with the maid from a neighbouring grand household...

Australian star Odessa Young takes the role of the maid, Jane Fairchild, whose employers, the Nivens - played by Olivia Colman and Colin Firth - are being admirably stiff-upper-lipped about the losses they have endured...

This slow-paced love affair would benefit from an explosive moment or several, but even without them Eva Husson's first English-language film has plenty to offer.

Released Fri 12 November

Contemporary art



Coventry's year as City of Culture has resulted in the spotlight being turned on one of its finest visitor attractions - the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum. The city-centre venue is currently exhibiting this year's Turner Prize artworks. Here's a run-down of what you can expect to find when you pay a visit to the Herbert...

Situated in the heart of Coventry city centre - right next to the historic cathedral - the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum is a proud and family-friendly venue, where people of all ages can broaden their cultural horizons and learn about the history of the city. And with Coventry currently the UK City of Culture, there's no better time to visit.

Boasting a range of galleries, events and exhibitions, the venue offers plenty to keep everyone entertained. As a National Portfolio Organisation, the Herbert is dedicated to delivering activities that support two of Arts Council England's primary goals: to reach the widest possible audience, and deliver work

that represents the height of ambition, talent and skill.

Visitors to the Herbert can explore the legend of Lady Godiva in the Discover Godiva gallery, learn about the Coventry Blitz in the Peace And Reconciliation gallery, and marvel at paintings from centuries ago in the Old Masters gallery.

The History Gallery, meanwhile, spans the medieval, Victorian and post-war periods, exploring how Coventry's past has shaped the present-day city. The gallery also offers visitors the chance to get hands-on by doing some weaving, trying on chain mail or sitting inside an Anderson shelter.

Alongside its permanent galleries, the Herbert hosts a wealth of regular events aimed at encouraging creativity - from Mini Makers Messy Play, for children under four, to the Create And Craft Café, for those aged 60-plus. There are also monthly Mothers Who Make workshops and family-friendly art talks to enjoy.

The Herbert has a selection of festive-season activities coming up in the next few weeks. Visitors can get creative with winter origami and rag wreath workshops, while younger children can enjoy Christmas-themed stories with sensory play, or sing along with Santa when he pays a visit to the gallery.

and much more...

Turner Prize 2021

The Herbert is currently hosting the Turner Prize, a national, annually held visual arts award recognising British artists for outstanding exhibitions and presentations.

For the first time, the Turner Prize's shortlist consists entirely of artist collectives, with all five nominees working with communities across the UK to inspire change through art.

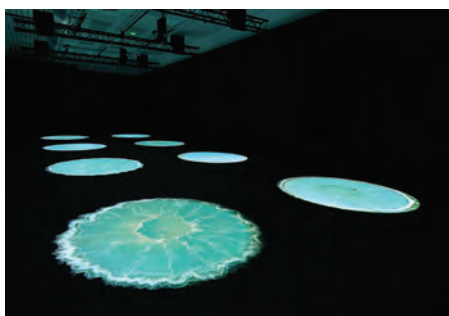
Belfast's Array Collective, Cardiff-based Gentle/Radical, and Black Obsidian Sound System (B.O.S.S.) all address the subject of conflict between communities in their installations.

Array merge performance, protest, video and ancient mythology in their work, The Druithaib's Ball. The stage for this piece is a makeshift pub, where the group explore the religious divides that have inhabited Northern Ireland for the last hundred years.

Gentle/Radical also use video as their primary medium. In a collaboration between community activists, youth workers, writers and others, they express their desire for people to live together in more equitable ways.

B.O.S.S. address a similar theme with their immersive exhibition, exploring how sound culture brings together marginalised groups against repression and discrimination.

Elsewhere, Cooking Sections examine the effect and impact of salmon farming in their installation, Salmon: Traces Of Escapees. The show reveals the gap between the perception of farmed salmon as an affordable luxury and the reality of its environmental



Cooking Sections: photo by David Levene

cost. The collective is proposing 'climavore' as a form of eating that adapts to the climate. Their dishes can be tasted at the Herbert's Alfred's Café.

Last but not least, Project Art Works fill their space with the work of the artists they support. The collective engage with people who have complex support needs and strive for greater visibility of neurodiversity in culture. Their installation takes the form of a digital archive of over 4,000 works, produced by neurodivergent artists and makers across a period of two decades.

The winner of the Turner Prize 2021 will be announced on 1 December.

The artworks will remain, free to view, at the Herbert until 12 January.

Coventry Biennial 2021: HYPER-POSSIBLE

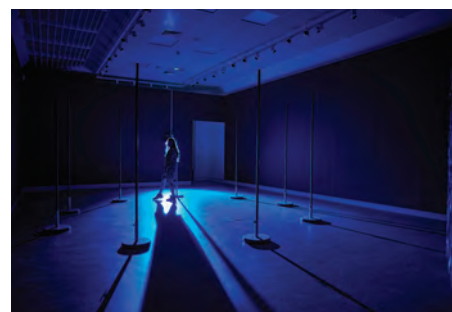
Also taking place this winter is the third Coventry Biennial, an exhibition of newly commissioned projects exploring socially, politically and critically engaged artistic practices.

Titled HYPER-POSSIBLE, the event is being held in seven exhibition spaces across the city, with the major exhibition at the Herbert remaining open until 6 February.

Local, national and international artists have developed works for the Biennial that explore some of society's most topical issues. These include: the social and political impact of people's identities; our relationships with the places we live; and the effect that human activity has on the planet.

With the aim of sparking cultural debate and promoting the city, the Biennial's programme includes a whole host of activities with which to get involved, providing visitors to the event with the opportunity to learn new skills and discover hidden parts of the city.

For further information, opening times and events, visit: theherbert.org



Array Collective: photo by David Levene



Gentle Radical: photo by David Levene



B.O.S.S.: photo by David Levene



HYPER-POSSIBLE: Photo by Garry Jones

Visual Arts previews from around the region



The Butterfly Effect

Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), until Wed 17 November

An exhibition which invites viewers to think about how artists represent change in an often complex world - and how opportunities for social and cultural renewal can emerge from the Covid crisis - The Butterfly Effect features work by a wide selection



of practitioners, including LS Lowry, Barbara Hepworth and Gabriel Rossetti.

The exhibition, co-curated by seniors from MAC's Culture Club, reflects on what has been an era of rapid transformation, encouraging the viewer to reconsider the featured artworks through a pandemic-created lens.



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Miss Clara And The Celebrity Beast In Art

Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, Fri 12 November - Sun 27 February

The latest in the Barber's ongoing series of masterpiece-in-focus displays revolves around an 18th-century rhinoceros known as Miss Clara.

Brought to mainland Europe in 1741 - and the first rhino to be sighted there since 1579 - Clara was presented to kings, queens, courtiers and commoners at destinations across the continent. She died in London in 1758.

This fascinating exhibition is built around

a small bronze sculpture of Miss Clara (one of the most popular art works in the Barber's collection) and also features a selection of other pieces in bronze and marble.

The display examines the emergence of menageries and zoos, as well as considering the capturing of animals such as Clara within the context of colonialism and empire.

Alchemy And Metamorphosis

The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, until Sun 30 January

'The innovations and ingenuity of North Staffordshire's early ceramic industrialisation' is the subject of this new exhibition from highly regarded artist Neil Brownsword.

Comprising new and ongoing works, the display brings together traditional ceramic skills with digital technology to re-imagine historic materials and practices.



Poppy Fields 2021

Lichfield Cathedral, Sat 6 - Sat 13 November

Award-winning artist collective Luxmuralis mark this month's Remembrance Day by returning to Lichfield Cathedral with light & sound show Poppy Fields.

The show sees images of poppies cascade down the cathedral, with the projections being accompanied by specially composed music from David Harper and poetry recorded by Oscar-winning actor Eddie Redmayne.



De'Anne Crooks: A Tale Or Two

The New Art Gallery, Walsall, until Sun 9 January

"Art transcends socio-cultural boundaries," explains Birmingham-based artist-educator De'Anne Crooks,

whose New Art Gallery show explores the influence and impact of Caribbean 'old wives tales'.

"Societal issues, such as systematic racism and the exploitation of a generation's search for their identity, are ones that I'm desperate to address. And while people may not always listen to what I say about these subjects, they find it harder to ignore the art that I create. My art is my way of having conversations about issues that are really pressing and which really matter to me."



Gathering Light

Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery, until Sun 12 December

It was in the Shropshire Marches back in Spring 2018 that an anonymous detectorist came across one of the most significant pieces of Bronze Age metalwork ever to be found in Britain...

In its day, the sun pendant - also known as a bulla - would have been worn as a clothes accessory. It was purchased last year by the British Museum for £250,000 and is soon to go on permanent display there.

The pendant's temporary stay in Shrewsbury provides Midlanders with the opportunity to view what is only the second bulla ever to be discovered in Britain.





A Very Model Of A Master Builder!

Master Model Builder Michelle Thompson reveals an exciting new build at the home of Lego in Birmingham



Michelle Thompson has presided over Birmingham's Legoland Discovery Centre as Master Model Builder since the attraction first opened over three years ago. While the past year and a half has forced the venue to adapt to lockdowns and social-distancing restrictions, one thing that hasn't changed is Michelle's love of Lego.

"We did have a bit of a pause because of Covid," she reveals, "but I've been able to make some plans so that we're going to have even bigger and better builds coming along. I've always been a positive person, and I've been able to bring that with me and stay enthusiastic about Lego - which is very easy to do. It's such a wonderful medium to work with, and I still love building and creating, even if it's just drawing up designs."

Michelle beat off the challenge of thousands of other applicants to land her current role as Master Model Builder, and plays a vital part in the curation of the Discovery Centre. As well as decorating the attraction with exciting new Lego models, she leads creative workshops and is responsible for maintaining the existing builds around the site. This includes Miniland, a Lego replica of Birmingham made from over five million bricks, complete with iconic landmarks such as Bullring, The Mailbox and the library in Centenary Square.

Before the opening of the Discovery Centre, Michelle worked in HR, so the move to her current role was quite the career change: "Being a Master Builder encompasses so many different areas, and I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. It's certainly a very different environment, but it's all part of the journey."

Despite the learning curve, Michelle is happy to confirm that the role is more than living up to her expectations: "It's definitely a fulfilling role, because I see the impact I can have on children. They enjoy the builds that I do, and I'm able to give them inspiration to do bigger and better things themselves, and to use their imaginations more."

"The greatest compliment I can receive is when children get enthusiastic about my work, and then they go off and make something that maybe they didn't feel confident enough to do prior to talking to me."

Michelle also reveals that parents often ask to buy her builds. While the pieces she puts together are not for sale, it's no surprise that people want to get their hands on her one-of-a-kind models. She's put together some elaborate pieces in her time, and enjoys paying homage to Birmingham through her work: "There are so many projects that I've loved building, but I particularly enjoyed the Aston Fire Station. It's such a beautiful heritage building, so it was great to try and replicate it and do it justice."

Recently Michelle has been focusing on a new build - a Lego replica of the Birmingham Primark, which recently went on display. Covering over 160,000 square feet and spread across five floors, Birmingham's Primark is the largest fashion retail store in the world. Michelle feels that it was only right to incorporate it into Miniland: "Because we have the biggest Primark store here, we thought it would be a good idea to have the smallest too," she explains. "The opening of Primark was a big launch for Birmingham, so we wanted to mirror that."

"The new build will have an interior and exterior, and it will also light up. I like to get all the little details into my builds, so there's been a lot of taking it apart and putting it back together again to get all of the fixtures in."

"I haven't been able to order anything from Lego because of the time schedule, so it's all made from Lego I already had in my workshop. It's made the build difficult, but it's been quite a good way to do it, because it challenges me a bit further. I've just had to work with what I've got and make the best of it - which is never a bad thing."

Complete with a Disney Café, a nail bar, a

hairdressing area and the unique façade of the Birmingham store, the new project is an intricate and impressive replica.

While the Primark build has been a time-consuming project, it hasn't stopped Michelle from thinking about what she'd like to build next: "I've drawn up plans for a three-foot-tall Godzilla for Halloween next year, which I'm excited about. I'd like to have some sort of monster mash-up, so I build them really big. But I'd also love to do a poll and find out what people want to see in our Miniland. I think that would be really interesting."

"Now that Christmas is just around the corner, we're hoping to build a life-size fireplace that lights up, so that Santa can sit next to it and greet all the children. It'll have some interchangeable sections so we can use it for different seasons too, because I always like to make sure that we can use our big builds more than once."

Michelle certainly isn't running short of inspiration, and she's keen to stress that nurturing the same imagination in children remains the primary focus of the Discovery Centre. "Encouraging creativity is so important to children's development, so this year we've launched a play squad, which is an activity for pre-schoolers to get involved in."

"I'm hoping that soon we'll be bringing in activities for older school children as well, because in schools at the moment I think there's a very clear right-and-wrong system. It's great to see that Lego are looking at the experience children are having during the school day and encouraging creativity, because with Lego there's no wrong answer - the sky's the limit."

.....

Legoland Discovery Centre is sited at Utilita Arena, King Edwards Road, Birmingham, B1 2AA.

For opening times and to book, visit: legolanddiscoverycentre.com/birmingham/

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Remember, remember the 5th of November

Bonfire Night is here again, but this year, unlike 2020, people can get together at one of the many organised events across the region. Here are just a few for you to consider...

Warwickshire

Friday 29 October

Fireworks at The Warwickshire, CV35 7QT (Early bird prices from £11)

The evening begins with a Halloween-themed disco, followed by fire-eating shows and fireworks finale. Food stalls and bouncy castles also feature.

Saturday 6 November

Bedworth Bonfire and Fireworks - Miners Welfare Park, CV12 8JT (Tickets £5)

A family-friendly display raising money for charities supported by Bedworth Lions and Nuneaton Round Table.

BONDfire Night - Warwick Racecourse, CV34 6HN (Tickets from £8)

The town bonfire is being run as a charity fundraiser for the Lions and Rotary clubs. This year's display has a James Bond theme. The evening also includes live music, bars and food & drink outlets.

Sunday 7 November

Coventry Rugby Fireworks Night - Butts Park Arena, CV1 3GE (Tickets from £4)

A celebration of sports and community followed by a fireworks display. Food & drink, kids' entertainment and a funfair also feature.

Worcestershire

Friday 5 November

Churchfields Family Fireworks Festival - Salwarpe, Droitwich, Worcestershire WR9 0AF (Tickets from £5)

Churchfields hosts its first ever family-friendly low-noise firework display. Families can also enjoy a selection of food, and huddle up around fire pits.

Saturday 6 November

Back with a Bang - Sixways Stadium, Worcester, WR3 8ZE (Tickets from £5)

The biggest firework display in Worcester, complete with seating and great views from the East Stand.

Hopfest On Fire - Hopley's Family Camping, Bewdley, DY12 2QL (Tickets from £5) This annual sell-out bonfire night features live music, street food and, of course, a firework display.

10 fun facts you may not know about Bonfire Night...

1. The first fireworks were invented in China in the 10th century, apparently by a cook who accidentally mixed together sulphur, charcoal and a salt substitute.
2. The first recorded firework display in England was at the wedding of Henry VII in 1486.
3. Whilst involved in the Gunpowder Plot, Guy Fawkes called himself John Johnson. This is the name he gave when he was arrested.
4. It's still possible to see the lantern Guy

Fawkes was carrying when he was caught in the Houses of Parliament. It's on display at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

5. Until 1959 it was illegal *not* to celebrate bonfire night in the UK.
6. The word 'bonfire' derives from the term "bone fire". In the Middle Ages, this type of fire was usually set up in order to burn bones.
7. The largest-ever firework display consisted of 66,326 fireworks. The

display took place in Portugal in 2006.

8. To this day, the Yeomen of the Guard still search the Houses of Parliament, just in case anybody tries to take a leaf out of Guy Fawkes' book.

9. Your average sparkler burns at between 1,000 & 1,500°C, meaning that three of them burning together is the same heat as a blowtorch.

10. The largest firework rocket was 13kg and was made and launched in Portugal in 2010.

THE GLAD GAME



In 2018, actor Phoebe Frances Brown was diagnosed with an incurable tumour in the area of her brain that controls speech, language and memory. Despite having to go through surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy in the years which have followed, Phoebe has continued to forge a successful career on the stage. She is this month bringing her one-woman show, *The Glad Game*, to Birmingham's Midlands Arts Centre. The production is supported by charity partner Brain Tumour Research. Here, Phoebe tells her story...

My symptoms began in August 2018. I'd been in Edinburgh, performing at the Fringe Festival and was feeling really tired. The festival is always intense; you work hard and play hard, so it wasn't all that surprising that I was feeling exhausted and suffering from headaches. Things didn't improve after The Fringe, however, and in September it all got a bit more serious. I would wake up feeling sick in the early hours of the morning, stumble to the toilet then vomit. Afterwards, I'd go back to bed, fall asleep and forget what had happened. Then, later in the day, I would suddenly remember.

"I was finding it increasingly hard to get up in the morning and feeling depressed because I just didn't know what was wrong with me." I'd never suffered from depression or any mental health issues previously, and it felt as if my whole personality was changing, which was really scary. In desperation, I called 111 one day and spoke to an NHS clinician, telling them that I felt hopeless. They thought it was a psychological condition and that was the only explanation that I could come up with too.

My symptoms continued for weeks. I was

living in Elephant & Castle in London at the time, but when I suddenly began to get really severe headaches, which first came on while I was at a Bonfire Night event, I decided to go to stay with my parents in Nottingham. I got off the train and went straight from the station to the doctor's surgery. The pain in my head was horrendous. I saw a GP, who prescribed me with migraine medication and paracetamol. I went home to Mum & Dad's house and I was sick again. Feeling dreadful and utterly helpless, I came to the decision to move home for a while.

My symptoms weren't going away and I had started to get double-vision, so, at the end of November, I was referred for an MRI scan. Having been referred by my GP on the Friday, I managed to get an appointment for a scan at Park Private Clinic in Nottingham on the Monday. The weekend before that appointment was so strange, as I had it hanging over me but there was nothing I could do. I'm part of a comedy collective of female actors called Major Labia and we were due to be performing at a gig in London the following week. Over the weekend, it was the artistic director's 30th birthday party, which I attended. My exciting, busy life was still happening all around me, but all I could think about was the forthcoming scan.

My MRI happened and almost immediately afterwards, I got a call from the clinic telling me I needed to go urgently to Queen's Medical Centre (QMC) in Nottingham. They'd found a 'large mass' in the left side of my brain. It was a mixture of relief, knowing that there was a reason for my symptoms, and complete devastation. Five days later, I was back in the hospital having major surgery to debulk the mass.

My operation was on 5 December 2018. It was a lengthy procedure, during which the surgeon managed to remove around 75 percent of the tumour. When I woke up afterwards, I felt really weird. I'd have the thought in my mind of what I wanted to say, but couldn't articulate the words. This is known as dysphasia and it lasted for quite a while after my surgery. I stayed in hospital for a few days before going home to continue resting and recuperating. On 12 December my parents and I went to see my consultant for the results from my biopsy.

He explained the diagnosis; a grade 3 astrocytoma. It was cancer. He said they wouldn't be able to completely get rid of it. It was a massive blow and we were all really upset.

A few days before I received my biopsy results, I'd found out I'd got a job at the National Theatre in London, which I'd auditioned for in September that year - it was a dream gig. I had been offered the role of Franny in *Small Island*, a play by Helen Edmundson based on the 2004 novel of the same name by Andrea Levy. I'd also been asked to be the understudy for one of the main parts, Queenie. As soon as I got my diagnosis, I asked my consultant if I could go ahead with the rehearsals, which were starting on 18 February 2019. The answer was 'yes', but I had the 'small' matter of six weeks of radiotherapy to get through first.

The radiotherapy, which had to be administered five times a week, was

horrendous. The side effects were awful but the worst thing about it was that I felt as though it was the first time that I'd been met face-to-face with my own mortality. It all happened so quickly. It was very difficult to process and it is something I'm still trying to get my head around.

My post-radiation MRI scan showed that things were stable but I had to follow up with a course of chemotherapy, to try to slow any progression of the disease. I focused hard on learning my lines for *Small Island* and returned to London in time to join rehearsals. It was a shock for my friends to see me again; I'd lost a lot of hair because of the treatment. We joked that I looked like Bill Bailey, as it had mostly fallen out at the front. I'd lost my fringe but still had long locks at the back. It was hideous and hilarious in equal measure. Eventually, I decided to chop it all off and have it really short. My friends were great and really supportive.

Meanwhile, I continued going to work but during one rehearsal I had a seizure, which meant I had to take some time out. While I was taking a break, a decision was made to reassign the understudy role to another actor. I was devastated but deep down, I knew that I wouldn't have been able to do it. Luckily, I was able to get back to rehearsals and go ahead with playing the part of Franny, which was completely manageable. The National was brilliant; even though I only had a few lines, they hired an understudy for me as well. I ended up sharing the role with my understudy, the two of us taking it in turns to appear each night.

I did all the shows in the final week and managed to complete the whole run of four months. It was a joy and felt like such an achievement, as I was on chemotherapy throughout.

Small Island finished on 10 August and after that, I got some radio work, which kept me busy. I also started to focus on a new project; a show called *The Glad Game*, which I'd begun writing in hospital, in which I explore my health journey. The hospital Wi-Fi was shocking; Netflix wasn't an option and there was nothing to do but write. My brother brought my laptop in for me and the play started to grow and grow. I continued writing after I was discharged, and it wasn't long until I had first draft of my first play. I sent it to a few close contacts, including independent producer Pippa Frith. Pippa showed it to director Tessa Walker and before I knew it, plans were being put in place for me to perform the play and share my lived experience with a live theatre audience.

I did some initial showings of *The Glad Game* at the end of 2019, and Nottingham Playhouse said that they really wanted to stage it. It was due to start in March 2020, which was really exciting. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in the UK, it was postponed. It ended up being postponed several more times, as the coronavirus restrictions went on and on. During lockdown, I stayed at home in Nottingham and occupied myself by writing a short comedy film to be filmed and produced. It will be available on iPlayer in the near future.

Then, in December 2020, my family was struck with another unexpected tragedy, when my dad died very suddenly from a brain haemorrhage. It was completely devastating.

Life offered no let-up in the new year. We were back in lockdown and, in March 2021, I found out that my tumour had started to grow back. The growth was discovered during a routine MRI scan - I'd had no new symptoms whatsoever. The outcome of the progression was another course of chemotherapy. It's gruelling, as it makes me really tired, but I'm thankful that, once again, I've been able to continue working throughout my treatment, and I'm delighted that *The Glad Game* tour is now under way. The plan is for it to tour in autumn 2021 and spring 2022, supported by charity partner Brain Tumour Research. It will also be available as a made-for-film digital edition streamed from each venue.

The Glad Game aims to debunk some of the myths around what life is like for people, particularly young people, living with cancer. It is about a life lived with cancer but also about creating the life you want in the most difficult of circumstances. It's about how, what and who you love can pull you through bad times. The play finishes at the point when I get back on stage at the National. I flirted with the idea of including my dad's death and the tumour relapse earlier this year, but instead I decided to end it on a positive. I wanted to write and perform a play about life being stranger than fiction; that even after receiving the most devastating news, there's still hilarity and joy to be had. There are still things to be glad about.

Phoebe Francis Brown: *The Glad Game* shows at Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) on Sunday 14 November

If you have been inspired by Phoebe's story, you may like to make a donation via braintumourresearch.org/donation or leave a gift in your will via braintumourresearch.org/legacy.

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BBC Good Food Show Winter

NEC, Birmingham, Thurs 25 - Sun 28 November

It's once again time to eat, drink and be merry as the BBC Good Food Show brings its winter edition to the NEC.

As well as watching celebrity chefs - including Tom Kerridge, the Hairy Bikers and Nadiya Hussain - cook up a storm on the show's Big Kitchen stage, visitors can also check out brand-new Christmas workshops and pick up some tasty festive treats from hundreds of hand-picked producers.



Festive Gift Fair

NEC, Birmingham, Thurs 18 - Sun 21 November

The Midlands' biggest fair of its kind is this year celebrating its 25th anniversary. The four-day event sees thousands of exhibitors showcasing all manner of gift ideas, from traditional trinkets to the quirky and unusual.

Artisan food & drink stallholders will be offering everything from prosecco to pickles, with plenty of new additions available to purchase and some fabulous fan favourites making a welcome return. Festive cheer comes courtesy of jazz bands and choirs, with St Nicholas himself further adding to the yuletide magic.

Classic Motor Show

NEC, Birmingham,
Fri 12 - Sun 14 November

Vintage motors and two-wheeled classics are in plentiful supply as this hugely popular show makes a welcome return.

Attractions include more than 600 exhibitor stands - offering all manner of products and services - and plenty of live-on-stage entertainment in the company of numerous celebrities and experts.



MCM Comic Con Birmingham

NEC, Birmingham, Sat 13 &
Sun 14 November

Catering for all areas of pop culture, Europe's leading Comic Con event is split up into different areas, to help enthusiasts get the most out of their visit.

The Treehouse area keeps the kids entertained with creative workshops, Quidditch demonstrations and silver sabre training. The Side Quest zone is the home of gaming, featuring both retro and modern consoles.

Pop Asia, meanwhile, is the place to be if you're a K-pop, J-pop, Anime or Manga fan, while Artist Alley showcases numerous independent creators.

And, as always, for those who choose to dress up for the event, Cosplay Central will be hosting casual showcases and masquerades.

Celebrities so far confirmed to appear at the two-day get-together include Star Wars' Ian McDiarmid and Hayden Christensen.





Medieval Christmas

4th and 5th (includes evening of the 4th)
December 2021



Avoncroft Museum, Stoke Heath,
Bromsgrove, B60 4JR
www.avoncroft.org.uk

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...



Christmas at the Castle

Warwick Castle, Sat 27 November - Mon 3 January

Warwick Castle's yuletide makeover includes the welcome return of the venue's renowned 20ft-high Christmas tree.

Santa and his merry elves are on-site too, taking up residency inside the castle and sharing stories of festive cheer with the children who come to visit them.

The venue's ever-popular colourful light trail and open-air ice rink also return to the castle grounds.

Visitors can take a well-earned break from the action in the Conservatory Tea House, where yuletide treats and Christmas afternoon tea await them...



Steam In Lights

Severn Valley Railway,
Selected dates from Fri 19 November - Thurs
23 December

Severn Valley Railway's Steam In Lights adventure begins at Bridgnorth station, where families are treated to a live festive show, after which an illuminated train will arrive to pick them up. Jump aboard, settle down in a private compartment, and enjoy on-board narration and music as the train journeys through a selection of bright and bold light displays.

Santa Safari

West Midland Safari Park, Bewdley, Fri 26
November - Fri 24 December

West Midland Safari Park's Santa Safari is back! The four-mile drive-through experience provides families with the chance to check out some of the venue's wild animals.

At the end of the safari, visitors can head on over to the Discovery Trail, to meet one of Santa's helpful elves. From there, it's on to the Christmas grotto, to say a big festive hello to the white-bearded one himself. Youngsters can take the opportunity to grab a picture with Santa and select a present from the elves' workshop.

Mrs Claus will be on hand too, offering refreshments in her kitchen.

An opportunity to sample a fully immersive virtual reality sleigh ride further adds to the festive fun.



A Victorian Christmas

Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge,
Selected dates from Sat 27 November -
Sun 2 January

Celebrate Christmas in traditional fashion with the Victorian residents of Blists Hill.

Wander around the town's cottages, enjoy fireside chats with the villagers and listen to tales of how they're preparing for the big day. Don a pair of skates and take to the ice on the town's rink, or tuck into some seasonal favourites (like mulled wine and mince pies) from the town's bakery.

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It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...

Santa's Grotto Experience

**National SEA LIFE Centre,
Birmingham,
Sat 20 November - Fri 24 December**

Young festive-season visitors to the SEA LIFE Centre can check out over 2,000 creatures (including sharks, gentoo penguins and the UK's first and only sea otters) before entering a glittering grotto where Santa and his elves will meet & greet them (not to mention hand them a gift to take home and enjoy!).

If you'd prefer your children's encounter with St Nicholas to be *seriously* socially distanced, the venue's 'virtual Santa meet & greet' option on Zoom can be experienced from the comfort of your own home.



Christmas At Cadbury World

Cadbury World, Birmingham, weekends from Sat 20 November - Sun 19 December and Mon 20 - Thurs 23 December

Festive celebrations get under way at Cadbury World this month.

The popular venue is presenting a whole host of seasonal activities for families to enjoy, all of which come complete with that all-important chocolately twist.

While Santa himself stars in an exclusive stage show, his ever-helpful elves will be handing out gifts to young audience members.

Visitors can also enjoy one of the 10 daily performances of this year's pantomime, *Sleeping Beauty*.

The Santa stage show and panto are both included in the ticket price.

Before heading for home, be sure to swing by the World's Biggest Cadbury Shop to pick up some handmade Christmas chocolates.



MiniChristmas

Thinktank Birmingham Science Museum, Sat 27 & Sun 28 November



Thinktank's MiniBrum needs decorating ahead of the festive season - and what better way to do it than by getting some help from some mini hands! Little ones can get involved with festive crafts, tree decorating and decoration making, as well as enjoy a wander along the reindeer trail. A certain special visitor will also be making an appearance in MiniBrum's den - but spaces are limited, so make sure you sort out your timed admission as soon as you arrive.

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It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...

Events



Winter Glow

Three Counties Showground, Fri 12 November - Sun 9 January

This brand-new festive event features daily twilight experiences and night-time entertainment. Attractions include one of the

region's largest real ice rinks, an illuminated light trail designed and created by local artists, and a giant 120ft observation wheel. Starting from December, families can also enjoy a special trip to see Santa on the Arctic Express land train.



The Enchanted Gardens

Webbs, Wychbold, Sat 6 November - Sun 2 January

Christmas visitors to Webbs will find themselves immersed in a fairytale world as they make their way through a landscape of twinkling lights and lanterns en route to the snowy north pole and a meeting with Santa Claus. With the gardens lit up in jewel-like colours and

fairly lights, guests can wander through four zoned areas, each of which is themed around a classic fairytale - Thumbelina, The Gingerbread Man, Hansel & Gretel and Jack And The Beanstalk.

The route is designed with families in mind and should take around 45 minutes to an hour to complete.

Festoon-lit tipi tents provide visitors with the chance to kick back and refuel..

Tudor World Christmas

Tudor World, Stratford-upon-Avon, Sat 18 - Fri 24 December

Discover how Christmas was celebrated in Tudor times by following a seasonal trail around the museum. Then settle down to enjoy a special storytime event with Father Christmas himself, who will be handing out gifts and posing for pics.

A Christmas Eve ghost tour around the town - complete with Q&A session and mulled wine back at the museum afterwards - provides a spinetingly festive treat for those of a sufficiently robust disposition.



Worcester Victorian Christmas Fayre

Worcester City Centre, Thurs 2 - Sun 5 December

Next year celebrating its 30th anniversary, the Victorian Christmas Fayre has become one of Worcester's highlight events, with 200 stalls selling local arts & crafts, novelty gifts and a wide selection of food & drink.

Victorian characters wander the streets - providing an insight into how the festive season may have looked 150 years ago - and there's a carousel and funfair to enjoy, too. Live music, traditional carols and talented street buskers provide the event with a seasonal soundtrack.



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Wed 26 Jan 2022 | £64.50



Pretty Woman The Musical at London's Savoy Theatre
Wed 9 March 2022 | £76.50



Andre Rieu at Resorts World Arena, Birmingham
Sat 30 April 2022 | £139



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Coventry Glides

Coventry Cathedral, Fri 26 November - Sun 9 January

Coventry Glides proved to be one of the highlights of last winter, with over 15,000 skaters taking to the ice.

This 'magical winter-wonderland experience' takes place in the

historic setting of Coventry Cathedral and promises plenty of outdoor fun for all skaters over the age of five.

Open seven days a week, the rink has been provided via a partnership between Coventry City of Culture Trust and Coventry City Council, with support from Coventry BID (Business Improvement District).



Ice Skate Birmingham

Centenary Square, Birmingham, Thurs 4 November - Sun 9 January

Ice Skate Birmingham and the Big Wheel make a welcome return to Centenary Square this month. While the wheel offers the opportunity to enjoy fantastic views across the city, the weather-proofed ice rink accommodates up to 300 people

per session, making it the city's largest ice rink. Younger or inexperienced skating enthusiasts can keep upright by using special penguin skating aids.

And when skaters have finished their Torvill & Dean routine, they can warm themselves up with some festive fare in the nearby Ice Lounge and double deck rooftop bar.

Santa's Winter Wonderland

SnowDome, Tamworth, Sat 13 November - Fri 31 December

This year's all-new Santa Show sees the white-bearded one facing a dilemma, as he realises Rudolph has been taking Christmas for granted. In a bid to re-focus and educate the red-nosed reindeer, Santa takes him on a trip through time to discover where modern-day Christmas traditions came from...

Suitable for all age groups, the show is just one element of the festive fun on offer at Tamworth's snowy indoor attraction this festive season.

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



What the Dickens?

Dickens Theatre Company Artistic Director
Ryan Philpott talks about his two-actor
adaptation of Charles Dickens' classic festive
story, *A Christmas Carol*, which is visiting
Birmingham's Old Rep in November.

Tell us about Dickens Theatre Company, Ryan...

The company wasn't a thing until 2015, even though I know it sounds like it should have been around forever. When I found that the domain name was available, it felt like fate. Up until then I'd been a jobbing actor, doing bits of TV. I hadn't done any theatre for years, but I'd begun to take on various writing commissions for television and theatre projects. Out of the blue I was asked to create a one-off live production of A Christmas Carol down in Rochester, Kent, as part of an annual Dickens festival. So I quickly knocked out a working script and, with a tiny budget, roped in various talented actor friends and we rehearsed it in three-and-a-half days. We did the read-through on the Monday and had our opening night on the Thursday. It was bonkers. But the audience loved it, so we knew we were onto something. I think it was the way we presented Victorian authenticity. Myself and our director, Eric Richard, had hit upon this house style where we would present Dickens' great works as stage plays as if performed by Dickens' own 19th-century theatre company. Since then we've grown and added to our repertoire of titles.

So Charles Dickens had his own theatre company?

He was a keen amateur actor, and he and his friends and family put on many theatrical performances during his lifetime. So we thought we should try to recreate that experience for a modern audience. We only use the props and costumes that a modest 19th-century theatre troupe may have had to hand. No big bits of set. No modern special effects. A few crates. A few stepladders. It's all about the actors taking the audience on a fabulous journey.

And it's just the two of you on stage?

Yes, myself and Louise Faulkner playing over 30 parts. It's quite a workout - as Jacob Marley says, "No rest, no peace!" - but it really works. Lou and I have worked together for years. It's part play, part double-act. Anyway, Charles Dickens toured the world with his one-man readings of his works, playing hundreds of his famous characters. So as we say in the play, "If Dickens can do it as one, we can do it as two!"

How true is your adaptation to the original novella?

It's about striking a balance between

entertainment and education. Much of our audience is made up of young people who are studying A Christmas Carol, which is not a play - it's a novella adapted into a play. Our responsibility is to give the students the key quotes, characters and moments that they would take from Dickens' original work... and also to try and be fantastic! But, with just two of us, of course we have to take one or two theatrical liberties.

Like having Louise play Scrooge?

Yes, in our production Scrooge is played by Louise. But it wasn't a conscious decision to be politically correct. It's not a female Scrooge, it's a female playing a male Scrooge. I knew I wanted one of the actors to be female and to play Scrooge's girlfriend, Belle. Then it all naturally evolved and Lou became Scrooge. And she is utterly convincing. When I'm acting with her, it's not a question of whether she's male or female. She is simply Ebenezer Scrooge. That's why theatre is so magical.

How long have you and Louise been working together?

We actually became mates in the late 1990s on tour with Blood Brothers. When I was first looking for actors back in 2015, I heard on the grapevine that Lou might be available, and I knew she would be perfect for what I had in mind. In Blood Brothers we were all playing various parts with lots of quick changes - and, of course, we were adults playing children. Since 2015 Lou has acted in all of our productions."

Everyone above a certain age will know your director, Eric Richard, won't they?

Eric is a very well-known face from TV. He played Sergeant Bob Cryer in The Bill on ITV for many years, but what many people don't realise is the amount of theatre he's been part of, going right back. As a young actor, he was at the Liverpool Everyman in the 1970s with an amazing cast full of the stars of the future, like Julie Walters and Jonathan Pryce, working with big directors. He also spent years on tour with the renowned Paines Plough Theatre Company. They would be on the road for months, turning up in all sorts of ramshackle spaces and creating exciting visceral theatre with just what was in the back of their transit van. Now Eric is passing all of that experience and knowledge down to us. We're very lucky to have him. His eye for detail and keeping our performances truthful

epitomises the way Dickens Theatre Company has developed. And he 's finally working as a director - something he thought he had missed the chance to do.

You've done a bit of TV yourself...

When I was younger, I had a certain look, and I always managed to get myself cast as soldiers, fireman and policemen. Uniform types! London's Burning, The Bill... you know, all that alpha male stuff? I was a 'semi-regular' in EastEnders, playing Sergeant Kenny Morris, and played Pam Ferris' son, Matthew Thyme, in Rosemary & Thyme for all three series. TV's great, and I'm very lucky to have had some great jobs, but my heart was always in the world of theatre. If you asked me to choose between standing on set in Albert Square or centre-stage at The Old Rep, there could only ever be one winner.

So do you and Eric ever compare notes on playing policemen on the telly?

No, I defer to Eric on all that. He was Sergeant Bob Cryer. That's the stuff of TV legend.

You've performed in Birmingham before, then?

We were here for three weeks back in the '90s with Blood Brothers. The city centre has changed a lot since then, but the vibe in China Town and theatreland still has the same buzz. As well as A Christmas Carol, Dickens Theatre Company also tour an adaptation of Macbeth. We were at the Old Rep with it in 2019 and sold a lot of tickets. We had a great few days staying in a flat near to the theatre. It was about two weeks before that first lockdown hit us all for six. We've been waiting to come back ever since.

Coincidentally, Blood Brothers is back at the Hippodrome while Dickens Theatre Company is at the Old Rep...

I know. What are the odds? We're hoping to catch up with a few old friends who still work on the show. We all feel a great affinity with the city and are so excited to be back in theatres performing live - and, of course, spreading our Dickensian Christmas cheer!

.....

A Christmas Carol shows at The Old Rep, Birmingham, on Wednesday 3 & Thursday 4 November

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Booking Now! Christmas

Christmas is the most magical season of the year - and after 2020's virtual no-show, we reckon there's a lot of making up for lost time to do. Check out what's happening across the region over the next two months...

Pantos

ALADDIN Join Aladdin as he embarks on the adventure of his life, discovers the magic of the lamp and falls in love with the beautiful Princess Jasmin, Wed 24 Nov - Sat 11 Dec, Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST Iain Lauchlan and sidekick Craig Hollingsworth promise comic capers aplenty in a panto staging of this much-loved fairytale, Wed 24 Nov - Sat 8 Jan, Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

ALL-NEW ADVENTURES OF PETER PAN Swashbuckling adventure featuring Sam Rabone, Thurs 25 Nov - Sun 2 Jan, Lichfield Garrick

THE PANTOMIME ADVENTURES OF PETER PAN Swashbuckling family adventure featuring Brad Fitt, Eric Smith, Victoria McCabe, Harry Winchester & Phil Stewart, Wed 1 Dec - Mon 3 Jan, Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury

DICK WHITTINGTON The Big Tiny return with the story of Dick, his cat and their quest to save London town, Thurs 2 - Sun 5 Dec, Festival Drayton Centre, Market Drayton, North Shropshire

ALADDIN Starring JP McCue as Dame Dolly and Sean Dodds as Aladdin, Sat 4 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, Royal Spa Centre, Leamington Spa

CINDERELLA 'Magical festive fun' featuring AJ & Curtis Pritchard as Prince Charming and Dandini, CBeebies' Evie Pickerill as Cinderella and Five Star's Denise Pearson as the Fairy Godmother, Sat 4 Dec - Sun 9 Jan, Wolverhampton Grand Theatre

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK Starring A1's Mark Read as Jack, CBeebies' star Andrea Valls as Princess Jess, Simon Howe as Dame Trott, comedy magician Jay Rawlings as Simon Trott & Janine Pardo as the Spirit of the Beans, Sat 11 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, Palace Theatre, Redditch

ALADDIN Starring Coronation Street's Tom Roberts as Abanazar, X-Factor finalist Sam Lavery as Princess Jasmine, Carl Duffield as Wishee Washee and Nigel Peever as The Emperor, Wed 8 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, The Place, Telford

PETER PAN Featuring Emmerdale star Tom Lister as Captain Hook, Disney Junior's Art Attack presenter Lloyd Warbey as Peter Pan, and local funnyman, Mark James as Smee, Thurs 9 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, Malvern Theatres

SNOW WHITE Starring Maureen Nolan as the Wicked Queen, Keith Jack as Prince Joseph and Rebecca Keatley as Snow White, Fri 10 - Fri 31 Dec, Stafford Gatehouse Theatre

CINDERELLA Jonathan Wilkes & Christian Patterson are reunited for a festive rags-to-riches tale, Fri 10 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent

CINDERELLA Doomed to drudgery by her wicked stepmother and spiteful stepsisters, Cinderella dreams of escape and romance. Meanwhile, King Keith of Kings Heath is making plans for a royal ball... Fri 10 Dec - Mon 3 Jan, The Core Theatre, Solihull

GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE BEARS Jason Donovan makes his panto debut as the Evil Ringmaster in this London Palladium production. Jason will be joined by Matt Slack as the Ringmaster, Doreen Tipton as the Lion Tamer, Andrew Ryan as Dame Betty Barnum, Alexia McIntosh as Candy Floss and Samantha Dorrance as Goldilocks, Sat 18 Dec - Sun 30 January, Birmingham Hippodrome



THE WIZARD OF OZ Starring One Show presenter Matt Baker as the Wizard and The Chase's Jenny 'The Vixen' Ryan as good witch Glinda, Tues 21 - Thur 23 Dec, Resorts World Arena, Birmingham

Kids Shows

ONE SNOWY NIGHT Meet fox, badger, hedgehog and friends in this stage adaptation of Nick Butterworth's



The Very Hungry Caterpillar - Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry

heart-warming story, Tues 16 Nov - Tues 28 Dec, Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham

ALICE IN WONDERLAND Adaptation of Lewis Carroll's classic tale, featuring a brand-new script and songs old and new, Sat 20 Nov - Fri 17 Dec, The Old Rep, Birmingham

JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH The Crescent Theatre Company presents its version of Roald Dahl's greatest adventure story, Tues 7 - Sat 18 Dec, The Crescent Theatre, Birmingham

SANTA'S MAGICAL MYSTERY GUEST Interactive show in which children get the chance to give their letter to Santa in person, Thurs 9 - Fri 24 Dec, Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

THE MINCE PIE MICE Interactive show for children aged from three to six in which two very different mice must learn to get along, and get baking, Sat 11 - Fri 24 Dec, Lichfield Garrick

DEAR SANTA Based on Rod Campbell's much-loved children's book of the same name, this festive family favourite is perfect for younger audiences with its running time of 55 minutes, Wed 15 - Fri 24 Dec, Birmingham Hippodrome

THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR CHRISTMAS SHOW A menagerie of 75 puppets bring four of Eric Carle's stories to life, complete with a festive twist. The featured stories are: Brown Bear, 10 Little Rubber Ducks, Dream Snow and, of course, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Sat 18 - Fri 24 Dec, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry

JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH Blue

Orange Arts presents its version of Roald Dahl's greatest adventure story, Sat 18 - Thurs 30 Dec, Blue Orange Theatre, Birmingham

STICK MAN: LIVE ON STAGE Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler's children's favourite is brought to life via a fusion of puppetry, songs, live music and funky moves, Sun 26 Dec - Sun 9 Jan, Birmingham Town Hall

THE SNOWMAN Raymond Briggs' famous festive tale is brought to life in this enchanting live show, which has been thrilling Midlands audiences for the past 25 years, Thurs 6 - Sun 9 Jan, The REP, Birmingham

Something Different

MATILDA THE MUSICAL Multi award-winning musical from the RSC, inspired by Roald Dahl's much-loved story, Cambridge Theatre, London

THE MAGICIAN'S ELEPHANT New family musical adapted from Kate DiCamillo's prize-winning novel, until Sat 1 Jan, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST Theresa Heskins' adaptation of the much-loved fairytale, featuring storytelling, music, humour and magical moments aplenty, Fri 26 Nov - Sat 29 Jan, New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme



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THE PLAY WHAT I WROTE Sean Foley directs a brand-new production of the hit *West End* show. Expect a plethora of well-known mystery guests to pop up during this festive run, Sat 27 Nov - Sat 1 Jan, The REP, Birmingham

ERIC'S CHRISTMAS CAROL The most famous of all festive tales gets an Eric-shaped makeover, Wed 1 - Sat 11 Dec, New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme

A CHORUS LINE Nikolai Foster's brand-new version of the legendary Broadway musical, Fri 3 - Fri 31 Dec, The Curve, Leicester

THE SNOW QUEEN Ballet Theatre UK presents a retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairytale, Sat 4 Dec, Tamworth Assembly Rooms

JERSEY BOYS Smash-hit musical telling the story of Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons, Tues 7 Dec - Sat 1 Jan, The Alexandra, Birmingham

A CHRISTMAS CAROL David Bradley stars in Simon Callow's acclaimed one-man adaptation of the classic Christmas tale, Mon 13 - Thurs 23 Dec, Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

THE NUTCRACKER Birmingham Royal Ballet presents a special adaptation of its London production - complete with the Dickensian tones of Simon Callow as Drosselmeyer, Fri 19 Nov - Sat 11 Dec, Birmingham Hippodrome

A CHRISTMAS WASSAIL A festive feast of music, comedy and spoken word, Mon 13 - Tues 14 Dec, Highbury Hall, Birmingham

BARBARA NICE'S CHRISTMAS CAROL Kings Heath's most famous housewife returns by popular demand for her much-loved festive show, Fri 17 Dec, Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham

A CHRISTMAS WASSAIL A festive feast of music, comedy and spoken word, Sat 19 - Tues 21 Dec, The Crescent, Birmingham

A DICKENSIAN CHRISTMAS Toast the Christmas spirit with Charles Dickens and celebrate with the very best of Victorian carols, classics and a selection of readings from *A Christmas Carol*, Wed 22 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

THE SNOWMAN Large-scale screening accompanied by live orchestra, Thurs 23 Dec, Coventry Cathedral

Concerts

KATE RUSBY AT CHRISTMAS Sat 4 Dec, Malvern Theatres

ORCHESTRA OF THE SWAN: THE TWELVE TALES OF CHRISTMAS OOS join forces with vocal quintet Papagena to present a blend of music and words featuring excerpts from TS Eliot, Charles Dickens, CS Lewis & Dylan Thomas, Tues 7 Dec, Stratford

Playhouse, Stratford-upon-Avon; Wed 8 Dec, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire

THE SIXTEEN Deck the Hall with boughs of holly as one of the world's most renowned choirs performs traditional Christmas classics, Wed 8 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

CHRISTMAS BY CANDLELIGHT CONCERT Music and readings old and new reflect on the meaning of Christmas and fill you with festive cheer! Sat 11 Dec, Lichfield Cathedral

EX CATHEDRA: CHRISTMAS MUSIC BY CANDLELIGHT An atmospheric sequence of music and readings - old and new - celebrating the Christmas story in all its guises, Tues 7 Dec, Coventry Cathedral; Sat 11 Dec, St Peter's Collegiate Church, Wolverhampton; Fri 17, Sat 18 Dec & Mon 20 - Wed 22 Dec; St Paul's Church, Birmingham

ARMONICO CONSORT: HANDEL'S MESSIAH Wed 8 Dec, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry; Tues 21 Dec, Victoria Hall, Stoke-on-Trent; Thurs 23 Dec, Malvern Theatres

CITY OF BIRMINGHAM CHOIR: MESSIAH Join the choir in its centenary year as it presents Handel's electrifying choral work, Fri 10 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

GRAND CHRISTMAS CLASSIC WITH ALAN TITCHMARSH Alan Titchmarsh presents a very special concert of seasonal classics, festive readings and joyful song, all crowned by a selection of your favourite carols, Sun 12 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

LOVE ACTUALLY IN CONCERT: THE FILM WITH LIVE ORCHESTRA Screening of the seasonal romcom accompanied by a full live orchestra, Wed 15 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS WITH THE CBSO Feelgood festive favourites, magical sounds and seasonal music old and new are here delivered by a special guest celebrity presenter and the CBSO's Simon Halsey CBE, Thurs 16 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

VIENNESE CHRISTMAS BY CANDLELIGHT Performed by London Concertante and featuring works by Strauss & Brahms, Fri 17 Dec, Coventry Cathedral

CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR Festive fun and special effects in the company of West End vocalists, a full orchestra and the Jingle Belle Dancers. Tim Howard and Kelly Ellis star as guest singers, Sat 18 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

COME AND SING AT CHRISTMAS WITH JOHN RUTTER Armonico Consort present a festive vocal workshop led by one of the greatest composers and arrangers of Christmas music, Sat 18 Dec, Coventry Cathedral

EX CATHEDRA: ANGELS, STARS & KINGS Hour-long family-friendly concert



Kate Rusby - Malvern Theatres

where younger audience members are encouraged to attend dressed as an angel, a star or a king, Sat 18 Dec, St Paul's Church, Birmingham

CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT Concert of carols and seasonal classics, staged in full 18th-century costume and in a candlelit setting. Actor Mark Williams provides readings, Sat 18 - Fri 24 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

CHRISTMAS CAROL SINGALONG Presented by the London Concert Orchestra. Featuring Louise Dearman as guest singer and Jonathan Cohen as presenter, Thurs 23 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

THE GREATEST SHOWTUNES Enjoy the best of West End and movie musicals in a concert performance featuring some of the greatest show tunes of all time. Performed live on stage by four West End stars and the London Concert Orchestra, Mon 27 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

NEW YEAR'S EVE GALA Bring in 2022 with the London Concert Orchestra and a programme of classics including *Nessum Dorma*, *Hornpipe*, *Land Of Hope And Glory* and more... Fri 31 Dec, Symphony Hall, Birmingham

Festive Markets

FRANKFURT CHRISTMAS MARKET Now in its 21st year and featuring an array of festive German delights - hot gluhwein, schnitzel and spicy sausage, Thurs 4 Nov - Thurs 23 Dec, Victoria Square, Birmingham

CHRISTMAS IN CATHEDRAL SQUARE This brand new event for 2021 will feature a mix of craft, gift and food and drink stalls, Wed 17 Nov - Sun 19 Dec, Cathedral Square, Birmingham

CITY SOCIAL Food, drink & beats next to The Mailbox, Thurs 25 Nov - Thurs 18 Dec, Suffolk Underpass, Birmingham

Festive Events

LANTERN FESTIVAL An after-dark illuminations experience featuring lit-up landscapes, glowing animal installations, rainbow tunnel and more... until Sun 5 Dec, West Midlands Safari Park, Bewdley

SIMPLY CHRISTMAS: THE CRAFTY CHRISTMAS SHOW A seasonal dream with exhibitors showcasing exclusive ranges of bespoke and unusual gifts including glassware, jewellery, art, candles, ceramics, clothing and more! Fri 4 - Sun 7 Nov, NEC, Birmingham

ICE SKATE BIRMINGHAM Family-friendly fun at Birmingham's biggest ice rink, Fri 4 Nov - Tues 9 Jan, Centenary Square, Birmingham

THE ENCHANTED GARDENS Follow the fairytale winter light trail and spot glowing toadstools, illuminated gingerbread houses en route to the North Pole where you'll find Santa and his elves busying themselves in their workshop, Sat 6 Nov - Sun 2 Jan, Riverside Gardens, Webbs, Wychbold, Worcestershire

CHRISTMAS LIGHT SWITCH ON Attractions include yuletide market, fairground rides & local talent. Light switch on at 5.15pm, Sun 7 Nov, The Parade, Leamington Spa

MALVERN WINTER GLOW Four festive experiences in one - an ice rink, personalised Santa experiences, an illuminated light trail and a giant observation wheel, Fri 12 Nov - Sun 9 Jan, Three Counties Showground, Malvern

CHRISTMAS GROTTO AT WEBBS Wander through a traditional Christmas grotto complete with winter scenes, surprises around every corner and the opportunity for children to meet Father Christmas in his cosy cabin, Sat 13 Nov - Fri 24 Dec, Webbs, West Hagley, Nr Stourbridge

JQ CHRISTMAS WINDOW TRAIL Discover the magic of the Jewellery Quarter... Sat 13 Nov - Sat 25 Dec, The

Booking Now! for Christmas



Winter Festival - Compton Verney

Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham

SANTA'S WINTER WONDERLAND This 'family festive extravaganza' features a new, larger theatre experience for 2021, as well as real snow, Sat 13 Nov - Sun 2 Jan, Snowdome, Tamworth

FESTIVE GIFT FAIR Gifts galore - from popcorn to prosecco, beer to brownies, cheese to chutneys, spices to spirits, puddings to preserves, chocolates to champagne and hampers to hog roasts! Plus live music throughout the day, Thurs 18 - Sun 21 Nov, NEC, Birmingham

LUMINATE COOMBE Immerse yourself in Coombe's mesmerising mile-long trail with stunning lighting elements and fabulous light play - all set to ambient music, Thurs 18 Nov - Fri 24 Dec, Coombe Park, Warwickshire

STEAM IN LIGHTS Experience a festive night-time adventure with thousands of lights and colourful displays - plus new music and narration for 2021, various dates between Fri 19 Nov & Thurs 23 Dec, Severn Valley Railway, Kidderminster



CHRISTMAS LIGHT SWITCH ON Thurs 25 Nov, Stratford-upon-Avon

CHRISTMAS LIGHT SWITCH ON & VICTORIAN EVENING Thurs 25 Nov, Warwick Town Centre

CHRISTMAS LIGHT SWITCH ON Fri 26 Nov, Kenilworth Town Centre

MINI CHRISTMAS Activities will include festive crafts, tree decorating, decoration making and reindeer trail, Sat 27 - Sun 28 Nov, Thinktank, Birmingham

THE ENCHANTED EXPRESS A brand new

Christmas experience featuring festive story, music and visit from Santa, various dates between Sat 27 Nov & Sun 19 Dec, Severn Valley Railway, Kidderminster

SANTA TRAINS Steam into Christmas and enjoy an all-new professional festive show aboard one of SVR's vintage trains, various dates between Sat 27 Nov & Thurs 23 Dec, Severn Valley Railway, Kidderminster

WINTER WONDERLAND AT COALBROOKDALE A 'magical' Winter Wonderland Grotto experience with the elves. Follow the path through the twinkling lights & trees, pausing to take photographs, before taking a seat around Santa's big chair, various dates between Sat 27 Nov & Thurs 23 Dec, Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron and Ingenuity, Ironbridge, Shropshire

SANTA HUNTS Complete with brand-new storyline for 2021, various dates between Sat 27 Nov and Fri 24 Dec, Black Country Living Museum, Dudley

NORTH POLE ADVENTURE Journey through the Magical Portal to the North Pole where children will receive a personalised gift from Father Christmas. There's also a Victorian high street and sweet shop to explore, as well as numerous festive activities to enjoy, Sat 27 Nov - Fri 24 Dec, National Forest Adventure Farm, Burton-upon-Trent

TWINKLE TOWN & SANTA EXPERIENCE Visit Santa in his grotto, meet his reindeer and enjoy Kannuk's Northern Lights Adventure story, Fri 27 Nov - Thurs 24 Dec, All Things Wild, Evesham

CHRISTMAS AT THE CASTLE Indoors and outdoors, there's plenty to explore at Warwick - including festive tales with Santa and his elves, skating on the ice rink, a light trail experience, and, new for 2021, Christmas afternoon tea in the Conservatory Tea House, Sat 27 Nov - Mon 3 Jan, Warwick Castle

COVENTRY GLIDES Winter fun on ice - set against the wonderful backdrop of Coventry Cathedral, Sat 27 Nov - Sun 9 Jan, Coventry Cathedral

LIGHTOPIA A brand-new immersive journey through the four seasons, transporting visitors to a whimsical land where time can be controlled, Sat 27 Nov - Sun 2 Jan, Alton Towers, Staffs

A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS Meet the people of Ironbridge as they prepare traditional festive treats, take some time to try out the site's ice skating rink, and finish off your visit with some seasonal favourites - mulled wine and mince pies... various dates between Mon 27 Nov & Sun 2 Jan, Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge, Shropshire

WORCESTER CHRISTMAS FAYRE Complete with carousel and fun fair, costumed characters, 200 stalls across the city centre and a programme of live entertainment, Thurs 2 - Sun 5 Dec, Worcester City Centre

SANTA'S MAGICAL WOODLAND GROTTO Find Santa by taking the woodland trail, lit with firefly fairy lights and surprises around every corner, various dates between Fri 3 & Thurs 23 Dec, Compton Verney, Warwickshire

LET'S WATCH! LET'S MAKE! THE GRINCH Free family festive fun sessions, Sat 4 Dec, Coventry Cathedral

BLISTS HILL CHRISTMAS WEEKENDS Enjoy a festive welcome from brass bands and carol singers, browse gift ideas, enjoy festive treats and test your skills on the town's real ice rink, Sat 4 - Sun 5 Dec & Sat 11 - Sun 12 Dec, Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge, Shropshire

ILLUMINATED ARBORETUM Suitable for all ages, this nighttime event invites visitors to stroll through a 'kaleidoscope of colour' as they journey through the 150-acre woodland site, Tues 7 - Sat 18 Dec, National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire

WINTER FUNLAND Festive spectacular comprising a gigantic ice-rink, a traditional circus, a full-size fairground and Santa's grotto, Thurs 9 Dec - Sun 2 Jan, NEC, Birmingham

CHRISTMAS EVENINGS AT AVONCROFT 1800 - 1950 Presented by Avoncroft Museum and the Artisans and Reenactors Marke, Sat 11 Dec, Avoncroft, Bromsgrove

TAMWORTH CASTLE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE Explore the castle decorated for Christmas and follow the festive trail through period rooms. Meet Santa and his elves in the Great Hall for a festive performance where gifts will be presented to younger visitors, Sat 11 - Sun 12 December, Tamworth Castle

AN ENCHANTED CHRISTMAS Join Santa and his elves as they attempt to stave off the naughty Rat King, who, together with his army, are trying to ruin Christmas, Sat 11 - Sun 12 & Sat 18 - Sun 19 Dec, Black Country Living Museum, Dudley

ENCHANTED WESTON See Weston's Temple Wood transformed into a magical illuminated forest and enjoy an array of street food, local ales, fizz, warming winter cocktails and live music in the Stables Courtyard, Thurs 9 - Sun 12; Thurs 16 - Sun 19 and Tues 20 - Thurs 23 Dec, Weston Park, Shropshire

SANTA DASH Two-mile dash, jog or walk in aid of St Richard's Hospice, Sun 12 Dec, New Road, Worcester

HIMLEY'S MAGICAL CHRISTMAS PORTAL Be transported to the magical home of Father Christmas via a large screen whilst taking your seat in one of Himley's festive marquees. A Christmas food market, live entertainment and a vintage fairground also feature... Thurs 16 - Sun 19 Dec, Himley Hall, Dudley

FAMILY CHRISTMAS ACTIVITIES Complete the Christmas jigsaw trail by finding pieces of Santa's sleigh around the museum. Craft activities include making automotive-inspired Christmas cards for family & friends... Fri 17 - Thurs 23 Dec, British Motor Museum, Gaydon, Warwickshire

DABBERS: CHRISTMAS FAMILY BRUNCH BINGO Featuring two games of 50-ball bingo in which animal riddles replace bingo lingo and animal pictures replace numbers on the bingo cards, Sun 19 Dec, Fargo Village, Coventry

CHRISTMAS FOR THE KIDS Take a walk into the woods to discover Crumpleberry's farm animals, enjoy a live theatre performance and sing carols around a grand piano. Daytime and twilight experiences available, Mon 20 - Wed 22 Dec, Crumpleberry Farm, Whitbourne, Worcester

CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE QUEST Follow the trail, find the clues and discover the castle's amazing stories and secrets, Sun 26 Dec - Mon 3 Jan, Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire



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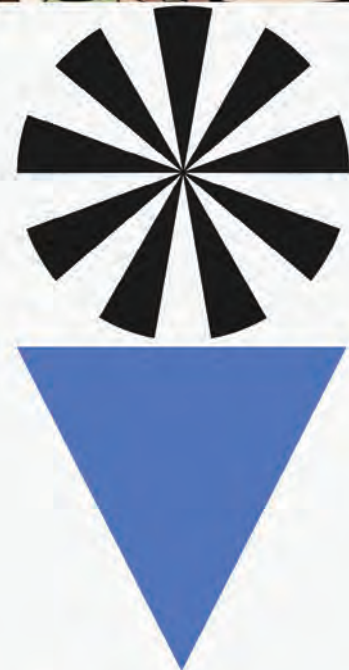
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