

JANUARY 2023

## New Year Message

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to wish all our members a Happy New Year.

It was good to meet so many of you enjoying yourselves at the Christmas Party this year. Our thanks go to Bob Houghton and Maurice Thompson for providing the music, the karaoke and the quiz, but especially to Lynn Tait for the amazing job she did with the catering.

Hopefully we will see many of you at our black tie event in the Pavilion at the Hope and Anchor on January 28th. Our thanks go to Mary Brigg and Michelle Cooper for organising this. It promises to be a super evening so if you wish to attend, just let Mary or one of the Committee know. We hope to arrange a number of other social events during 2023 so watch this space.

We have an exciting programme planned for 2023, some of which have already been cast and are in rehearsal. Further details of these can be found in the Production Co-ordinator's Column later in this newsletter. However, whether you are an actor or a singer, none of these productions could go ahead without a backstage crew and a Front of House team. We are finding it increasingly difficult to cover the bar, box office and Front of House. Five volunteers are needed for each evening that a show is on and it is frequently the same few people who perform these roles over and over again. Can I ask that if there is a production that you are not performing in, you might like to consider other ways of supporting your fellow thespians by volunteering for these roles and becoming part of the support team. If each of you could do at least one night it would make such a difference and it would be much appreciated by all involved.

My heartfelt thanks go to all of the Committee, the actors and singers, the backroom teams and all those who already give their free time so willingly to make the Phoenix Theatre such a wonderful venue for the people of Ross-on-Wye.

**Pat Fitzpatrick (Chair)**

**Screen at the Phoenix** will be back in 2023 but as yet we have not finalised the programme. However, we have made an application to National Theatre Live to enable their plays to be shown at the Phoenix. In the next few months we hope to bring you "The Crucible" (Arthur Miller), "Othello" and "Good" (CP Taylor) with David Tennant in the lead role. The NT Live performances will be shown in tandem with our other films. We aim to bring you "Living", "The Banshees of Inisherin" and "Mrs Harris Goes to Paris" when the licences for these films become available.

The full houses and enthusiastic audience response to "How The Other Half Loves" were very gratifying as director and testament to the hard work put in by the cast and supporting crew to bring the show to the Phoenix. It really did demonstrate that audiences have an appetite for live theatre and the pleasure of sharing the social experience and quality performances that the Phoenix has to offer.

**Graham Russell (Newsletter Editor)**

## Production Co-ordinator's Column

The **Performathon and Gala Concert** on 15<sup>th</sup> October raised £550 for Children in Need. Many thanks to Lyn Smith for organising the raffle and to Mary Brigg and the Singers for a great show.

**Our Star Theatre Company** performed 'Murder Mystery – the Play' on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October. Congratulations to Ben Mowbray and his team.

**How the Other Half Loves** by Alan Ayckbourn, which was performed from 19<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> November, played to full houses for the entire run. Congratulations to the director, Graham Russell, his cast, and crew for an outstanding production. Reviews are shown later in this newsletter.

**The Phoenix Theatre Singers Xmas Show** took place on 1, 2 and 3 December. It achieved 89% seat occupancy and raised donations of £280 for the Ross Lions Xmas Lunch. Congratulations to Mary Brigg and all concerned.

The **Phoenix Theatre Xmas Party** on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> December was a great success. 50 members and friends attended. We enjoyed a complimentary buffet. Music was provided by our DJ, Bob Houghton, and karaoke by Maurice Thompson. Congratulations and thanks go to Lynn Tait and her team for organising such an enjoyable evening.

**Auditions for 'Murder in Company'**, by Philip King and John Boland which Brian Jackson will be directing for our May production, will be on **Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> January** at 7.30pm. It is a thriller set in a church hall, where a theatre group is rehearsing. The cast comprises 4 men and 4 women, with good parts for all characters. It is set in the 1960s. There are tensions within the society and a prowler is known to be stalking the area. Could it be one of the members? Do come along to audition. It should be fun.

**Phoenix Youth Theatre** will restart in the New Year on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> January with the facilitator from the Courtyard Theatre in Hereford, Kate Ross. There will be two sessions each Saturday, Phoenix Kids, ages 4-7 years, from 9.30 to 10.15am, (£41/term) and Phoenix Juniors, ages 8-14 years, from 10.30am to 12 noon, (£45/term), in term time. After the February half term, the Phoenix Juniors will split into two groups, Group 1 from 10.30am to 12 noon, and Group 2 from 12 noon to 1.30pm.

There will be a Youth Theatre February Half Term Workshop on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> February, from 9.30am to 4pm. The theme will be 'Heroes and Villains'.

Kate is planning a Youth Theatre summer production on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2023. More details to follow.

A **Members' Black Tie Dinner Dance** will be held on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January at 7pm, at the Pavilion at the Hope and Anchor in Ross-on-Wye, celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Phoenix Theatre Company, originally in the name of R.O.A.D.S. This will be for members, their families, and friends. Contact Mary Brigg on [wbrigg@btinternet.com](mailto:wbrigg@btinternet.com) if you would like to come. The ticket price is £23.

**Peter Gill** will be bringing his one man show, 'An Evening of the Wit and Songs of Noel Coward' to the theatre on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> February. Tickets £12.

**Peter Gill** will accompany **Anita Harris** on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February for 'An Evening with Anita Harris'. Tickets £18.

**Members' Social Evenings.** The committee are planning a series of Members Evenings in 2023. The first will be the dinner dance on January 28<sup>th</sup>, followed by a Social Evening with drinks, chat, and nibbles on 25<sup>th</sup> February. There may even be a quiz. Maurice Thompson is organising a rehearsed reading for a Member's Evening on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> April. More details to follow.

'**Venice Revisited**', a new musical by Richard Elgood and Richard Watson, will take place from Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> to Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> March. The musical is based on Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice', but with a happy ending. The musical has been cast, and the cast of 18, plus 5 crew are in place. Richard Elgood has been rehearsing small groups in the autumn, and full rehearsals start on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> January, and will be on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Tony Hearn will be the assistant director and Mary Brigg will be the repetiteur, assisting Richard Watson, who will be the accompanist and musical director. Richard has composed the score for the show. More details later in this newsletter.

**Suzanne Hill**

### **NODA Review of How The Other Half Loves**

By Alan Ayckbourn, this classic play was first performed in London in 1970 and also first performed at the Phoenix in 2005. It features the lives of three couples all linked by their husbands working for the same company; Frank & Fiona, Bob & Teresa and William & Mary. The play revolves around misunderstandings by Frank (the boss) as to the reason why his wife and Bob were both out late one morning till 2am and they both used William & Mary, unknown to them, as their alibi. Subsequently William & Mary get invited to dinner by the other couples, albeit on separate evenings.

The clever set was a permanent but split scene depicting the homes of both Frank and Bob and with great timing, both halves of the set were used often at the same time, by all the players. The set was busy with appropriate furniture and props and all the cast were well dressed. The colour and style of the furnishings indicated which space belonged to which home.

Frank the boss of both the other men, is a somewhat rambling confused and forgetful character who quickly but innocently comes to the wrong conclusion, whilst his wife Fiona is a smart attractive lady exasperated with him and who rather guiltily tries to divert attention away from her late night out. Both are played very convincingly by Robin Haig and Alison Clarke.

Bob and Teresa (Tom Lee-Hynes and Lynne Casey), live in a less salubrious home and are clearly suffering from the pressures of bringing up their youngster. Teresa particularly struggles at home all day whilst Bob is in the office. You can feel the tension between them, and are rather dishevelled in manner and appearance as a consequence. Again, both provide a realistic performance.

As a result of both Fiona and Bob suggesting as part of their respective alibi, that William & Mary have their own marital problems, Frank and Teresa coincidentally feel it might help them to talk if they are invited to



dinner. This was a most impressive scene when William (Steve Banner) and Mary (Amanda Barrett) are sitting with both hosts at the same table, centre stage, but swivel their seats from one meal to the other, sometimes with just one line apart, whilst the non-hosts maintain a freeze. William is a 'Jack of all trades' with a somewhat overbearing approach to matters, well played by Steve, and Mary is a rather nervous apologetic character which Amanda maintains well throughout.

In Act 2 further confusion arises, often due to Frank. With just a few small glitches, speed is maintained throughout and the timing of entrances and exits were spot on as the players often crossed each other (in their respective homes) but I felt one's attention was always where it should be. This must have presented a minefield for director Graham Russell, but was achieved with a great level of success. The cast received a good ovation at the conclusion of the first night and as the run continues I hope they all feel they can smile back as a result – they deserve to.

I would like to thank the Phoenix for their usual warm welcome and look forward to "Christmas with the Phoenix Theatre Singers".

**Bruce Wyatt (NODA)**

### **NODA Review of Christmas with The Phoenix Theatre Singers**

Set against a sparkling star back-cloth, 14 ladies in their signature black trousers and red tops and gents in their DJs with red bow ties, presented an interesting range of Christmas related songs blended together by MD Mary Brigg, which put everyone in a great seasonal mood. After Michelle Cooper gave a warm opening welcome, the full chorus presented three songs including the traditional spiritual number 'The Virgin Mary had a Baby Boy'.

Elaine Tomlins presented an amusing poem 'Twas The Night Before Christmas' which reminded us of the toy makers pact to keep parents busy assembling toys, and to find in many instances batteries are not included! Sandy MacNeill sang 'The Man With The Bag' with some great expression and this was followed by some nice part singing by the ladies in 'Angels Carol' by John Rutter.

Rita Bingham gave us a traditional carol 'Bethlehem' and Mary Brigg and Richard Watson who was relieved of the piano by Jayne Lunt, gave us a great version of 'Baby Its Cold Outside' which was very well received (and true!). Sue Nicholson presented us with her very amusing Pam Ayres version of 'Once I was a looker and so was my spouse' and Part 1 concluded with the full chorus singing Peter Gritton's 'Follow That Star'.

The audience was invited to savour some mince pies in the interval, for a donation to the Ross Lions Christmas Lunch Appeal for which the Phoenix Theatre was raising funds to help the lonely and vulnerable at Christmas time.

Part 2 opened with a melodic 'A Rhapsody of Christmas' concluding with 'Silent Night' and this was followed by a very nice version of 'I'll be home for Christmas' sung by Julianne Reeves, with some great accompaniment by Richard. Suzanne Hill gave a very funny short version of 'Cinderella' the panto, covering just about all the main characters with a quickfire use of 7 hats!

The gentlemen then presented 'Drummer Boy / Peace on Earth' and the chorus sang a very nice 'When a Child is Born', with lead vocalist Margaret Harnett. Jacky Bedford and Natalie Smith sang 'Mary Did You Know' and after their gentle rendition of 'The Lamb' the chorus upped the tempo with 'Jingle Bell Rock'. Michelle sang 'Snowman' with great feeling and the concert was rounded off with the full chorus singing Boubil & Schonberg's 'Bethlehem' and then 'Merry Christmas Everybody'. There was just time for two carols when the audience joined in and its pretty certain everyone went home happy.

**Bruce Wyatt (NODA)**

## **Venice Revisited (March Production)**

Richard Elgood has written this exciting new musical based on Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice', but with a happy ending. Richard Watson has composed the score for the many songs in the show.

Our production at the Phoenix Theatre will run from Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> to Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> March. Richard Watson is the musical director, with Mary Brigg as repetiteur. Tony Hearn will assist Richard Elgood in the direction.

The cast of 18, comprise Michelle Cooper as Portia, Shylock's daughter; Lauren Crouch as Nerissa, her maid; Stacey Thornhill as Jessica, Portia's twin; Sandy McNeill as La Zingara, the storyteller; Jacky Bedford as Leah, Shylock's first love; and Stephanie Piggott as Leah's mother.

Brian Jackson as Shylock; Andy Doyle as Bassanio, in love with Portia; Steve Doidge as Gratiano, Bassanio's man and Arragon, Portia's suitor; Tony Hearn as Antonio, the Merchant of Venice; Tudor Smoleanu as Lorenzo, in love with Jessica; Maurice Thompson as The Duke of Venice and a lawyer.

Marian Francis, Natalie Smith, Suzanne Hill, Mary Brigg, Stephanie Piggott, Tudor Smoleanu, Steve Doidge and Nigel Patrick play various chorus roles.

The crew comprise Chris Robertson, Kathy Ashford, Alan Smith, Maurice Thompson and Lynn Tait.

We trust you will all support this new venture and take on front of house roles during the run, as well as coming to see the show to support our wonderful theatre.

**Suzanne Hill**

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## **Auditions for Murder in Company**

We are holding auditions for 'Murder in Company', to be directed by Brian Jackson, on Thursday 5th January 2023 at 7.30pm. Notes for those auditioning:

An am-dram company is rehearsing on-stage for rehearsal of its latest thriller under the direction of its dictatorial Director Philip Stevens. But strains within the company more than equal those in the play they are rehearsing. Philip's wife is more than just friendly with one of the men in the cast, a prowler is known to be in the neighbourhood and one of the other women seems to know the new hall caretaker from the past. And then one of the women in the company is attacked. The rehearsals proceed under difficulties until the mysterious death of the caretaker brings the situation of the company's 'who-dunnit' even more closely into real life as it transpires that almost everyone might – and could – have murdered the dead man.

Cast is as follows:

ALAN WILSON - Young, attractive, trying to pursue an affair with Margaret.

MARGARET STEPHENS - The director's wife. Attractive but somewhat nervous and uptight. Afraid of being 'found out.'

TED SMITH - The new hall caretaker. Meeting members for the first time his manner is surly, concealing a bullying personality and not averse to trying a little blackmail.

PHILIP STEPHENS - The Director. Stressed and suspicious of his wife Margaret. Prime suspect in the death of the caretaker.

RONNIE MEADOWS - Stage Manager. Cheerful, somewhat immature whose irritating 'Court Jester' antics mask a deadly secret.

PATRICIA ROBINS - Pretty, attentive, quietly intelligent.

DORIS STEWART - Normally quite self-possessed, she later arrives hysterical, a victim of 'the prowler'.

PHOEBE KERSHAW - Pleasant, worldly, has acted professionally onstage. Later revealed she has a long standing hatred of Ted Smith.

Do come along. For more information, please contact Brian Jackson or myself.

**Suzanne Hill**

**Peter Gill - An Evening of the Wit and Songs of Noel Coward  
(Saturday 4th February at 7.30pm)**

Pianist and entertainer, Peter Gill presents a tribute to the wit and song-writing skill of that most English of Englishmen, Noel Coward, who said of himself I am an enormously talented man and there is no point in denying it. Born in 1899, Coward was an actor, writer, composer, director, producer, and in later life painter– and he excelled at them all. Peter will remind us of his dazzling wit and perform such gems as *Mad About The Boy*, *A Bar on The Piccola Marina*, *Don't Let's Be Beastly To The Germans*, *Mrs Worthington*, *There Are Bad Times Just Around The Corner*, and *Mad Dogs & Englishmen*.



**Peter Gill - An Evening with Anita Harris  
(Saturday 11th February at 7.30pm)**

Anita Harris has had a breathtaking career spanning over fifty years.

She has been a film star, television star, graced the top of the pop charts, become a pantomime legend as Peter Pan, starred in *Cats* in the West End and featured in 7 Royal Command Performances.

She has never stopped performing and has worked alongside legendary names in the world of entertainment such as Harry Secombe, Phil Silvers, Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, magician David Nixon and Clive Dunn.

Join her and her pianist Peter Gill in an intimate evening as she sings her favourite songs and regales you with stories from her fascinating life.

