

## APRIL 2024

The last quarter has been another busy period at the Phoenix, the highlight being the Phoenix Company's production of "Maggie May" by Frances Poet and directed by Brian Jackson. You can read a NODA review of the production later in this newsletter but clearly the cast gave a brilliant performance, not least Jane Bovell playing Maggie admirably supported by Steve Doidge as Gordon. Dementia is not an easy watch for some as it can be at times too close to home, but the sensitivity of the performances drew warmth and understanding from the audiences. It was also good to see new faces on stage at the Phoenix, notably Tudor Smoleanu as Michael and Lori Weber as Claire. Both of whom have impressive theatre experience. The theatre seems to be going through a resurgence of new members at the moment which bodes well for the future.

The members evenings in the form of a "40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Black Tie and Posh Frock Event" at the Royal Hotel in January, and an "An Improvisation Evening" in February were well supported and an opportunity for new members to get to know us. The "Open Mic Night" planned for Wednesday 17th April sounds fun.

Screen at the Phoenix has been well supported and the National Theatre Live productions are attracting bigger audiences now that the word is getting around. "Dear England" with Joseph Fiennes as Gareth Southgate was an amazing stage spectacle and although it was about football, the play touched facets of our everyday lives where confidence needs to be nurtured in a challenging world. Andrew Scott's "Vanya" was another incredible piece of acting brought to us from the West End. The standard of performance shown by NT Live never ceases to amaze me. How lucky we are to have such talent at the flick of a switch (well may be a few more than that if you come up to the projection box!). Again the incredible acting talent of Mark Gatiss (John Gielgud) and Johnny Flynn (Richard Burton) in "The Motive and the Cue", which brought laughter and tears in equal measure, was something to treasure. NT Live will continue with Michael Sheen as Aneurin Bevan in Nye. The winter film programme opened with award winning "Oppenheimer". "The Great Escaper" with Michael Caine teaming up with the late Glenda Jackson was a moving account of a veteran revisiting D-day.

Flicks in the Sticks will be using our venue on Wednesday 10th April to screen "Untouchable 2011" to allow them to compare our venue with that of their regular venue of St Mary's Hall. The seating in our auditorium is more suited, it would seem, to the showing of films with sub-titles. We are aiming to combine with Flicks in the Sticks to show a week of films in July/August as part of a Summer Film Festival.

The Youth Theatre's production of Wonder Crumping by Roald Dahl, under the guidance of Kate Ross from The Courtyard, will be taking place over the weekend of the 6th & 7th April. There are two teams, one performing on the Saturday and the other on the Sunday. It will be good as my granddaughter Thea is in it!

Rehearsals have already started for our May production of "The Unexpected Guest" by Agatha Christie directed by Amanda Barrett.

**Graham Russell** (Newsletter Editor)

## Production Co-ordinator's Column

**The Phoenix Youth Theatre**, run by our facilitator from the Courtyard Theatre in Hereford, Kate Ross, will be presenting **'The Wonder Crumping World of Roald Dahl'** on **6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> April at 2 pm and 7 pm**. Tickets, at £12, and £10 for under 18 year olds, are selling fast.

Our January member's event was a **40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Black Tie and Posh Frock Event** at the Royal Hotel, and the February event was **'An Improvisation Evening'**. Both were well attended and enjoyed by all. Thanks to Mary Brigg and Tony Hearn for organising the evenings.

**Peter Gill** presented **'The Comedy Songbook'** on 3<sup>rd</sup> February and **'Talbot House'** on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. Both events were well received as ever.

Our March production of **'Maggie May'** by Frances Poet, directed by Brian Jackson, was a great success. This was a heartwarming play touching on how dementia impinges on everyone who know the person involved. We achieved 73% seat occupancy, with a standing ovation on the opening night. A review is published later in this newsletter. Congratulations to Brian, his cast and crew.

**Keith James** is to perform **'The Music of Yusuf – Cat Stevens, on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2024 at 7.30 pm**. **Tickets £16**. There is a link to our theatre booking page for you to book tickets.

**Our April Members Evening** will be **'An Open Mic Night'** hosted by Mary Brigg and Richard Watson. This will take place on **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> April at 7.30 pm**. There will be live keyboard accompaniment available and technical support for any backing tracks you may want to use. Please contact Mary on [wbrigg@btinternet.com](mailto:wbrigg@btinternet.com) if you wish to perform.

Our May production will be **'The Unexpected Guest'** by Agatha Christie, directed by Amanda Barrett. Rehearsals have begun and the cast comprise Jackie Phillips, Phil Field, Nathan Cole, Jacky Bedford, Brian Jackson, Terry Lewis, Ann Stirrup, Maurice Thompson, and Laurie Pegrum. Production dates are **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> to Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> May, excluding the Sunday**.

**The Phoenix Theatre Singers** will perform their summer show entitled **'Colours of Life'** on **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup>, Friday 21<sup>st</sup> and Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> June**.

**Peter Gill** will present **'A Swinging Summer's Evening'** on **Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> July at 7.30 pm**. Peter and his musical friends will perform an eclectic mix of cool swing standards and boogie woogie. This will be an evening of sublime entertainment and great musicianship all interlaced with Peter's friendly and witty banter. Tickets £17.

**Flicks in the Sticks** are trying out our venue on **Wednesday 10th April** to show **Untouchable 2011 (15)**. Tickets at £5 can be booked via the Arts Alive website:

<https://artsalive.co.uk/films/film/?id=1674>

**Screen at the Phoenix** will be showing **The Lesson** on **Saturday 20th April**, **The Holdovers (15)** on **Saturday 4th May** and **Nye (NT Live)** on **Saturday 1st June**.

**Screen at the Phoenix** in conjunction with **Flicks in the Sticks** will present a **Summer Film Festival** at the Phoenix for one week from **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> July to Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> August**. Details to follow.

**Our Star Theatre Company** will present their touring show **'Death(s) at Sea'** by Eleanor Catherine Smart, on **Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> and Friday 6<sup>th</sup> September at 7.30 pm**.

**Keith James** will bring **'The Keith James Songbook'** to the Phoenix on **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> September**.

**Suzanne Hill**

## Maggie May NODA Review

Maggie May, a new play premiered in 2022, tells the story of a family crisis and the strains it places on their son's romance with his new girlfriend. Above all it's a love story, laced with music and mixed humour and drama. An excellent production by Brian Jackson captures every bit of that and more.



*(left to right: Suzanne Hill, Jane Bovell, Steve Doidge, Lori Weber & Tudor Smoleanu)*

The play opens with Maggie (Jane Bovell) getting husband Gordon (Steve Doidge) up and dressed as he recovers from a stroke. They are expecting son Michael (Tudor Smoleanu) soon to arrive for a birthday lunch with new girlfriend Claire (Lori Weber). Michael is now running the family business single handed. Meanwhile Jo (Suzanne Hill) a good friend of Maggie visits, always good for a laugh, but complains that Maggie has been letting her down by not joining in with various activities. Without exception the acting was excellent throughout.

Maggie explains how useful it is to write the odd 'post-it' note, as a reminder to do something and picks one up from the floor (One, I wondered if it had been left inadvertently before the play began). But in a later sequence when Maggie reminisces and others on stage freeze, it also becomes clear that for simple routines her memory is not so good, including calling Claire, Emily (an old girlfriend) on several occasions. At the lunch table, Gordon feels now is the time to announce Maggie is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, news which Michael finds hard to accept. When Maggie explains what it is like to suffer from Alzheimer's disease, Jane's acting is superb.



There are some lovely and moving moments when Gordon sings to Maggie who joins in, with the appropriate background music for the song. Their warm relationship together was totally convincing. From suffering an infection, Maggie is in hospital and visited by Jo and Gordon. Maggie realises she had previously upset Jo and although she can't remember exactly what she said, she still felt bad inside. An absorbing scene so well handled.



Scenes switched from one home to another by the simple repositioning of a settee and change of seat cover and cushions. At Claire's home, Maggie learns that she and Michael had split up, mainly due to Michael's lack of communication which Tudor acted out convincingly, but Maggie reads out some heartfelt words that she noted he had said about Claire, which clearly explained that he still loved her very much. Claire obviously felt the same way and Lori's performance earlier as the new girlfriend, and later on was both endearing and compulsive watching.

There was another poignant moment when a large number of 'post-it' notes fell from above, when Maggie's Alzheimer's disease was put into context.



In Act 2 there were a number of what I call 'moments of (great) theatre'; when Michael left a hospital visit because he could not cope with the situation, Gordon's understanding for Maggie when she was frightened about the future, a lovely scene when Maggie visited Jo, who gave a very natural performance throughout, another moving moment when Gordon starts to sing and Maggie joins in and a very moving moment when Gordon realises she hadn't remembered that someone recently mentioned, had died.

The staging was also excellent; as usual a well-built set, a variety of lighting effects and music accompaniment that was just right. At the opening of each act, a spotlight on a pair of gnomes embracing each other, set on a sideboard, for me epitomised the warmth behind their relationships that faced adversity but succeeded. Thank you for the warm welcome and an excellent evening of quality acting.

**Bruce Wyatt (NODA)**

## **NODA Nominations**

I am delighted to inform you that The Phoenix Theatre has received four NODA nominations for our 2023 programme! The nominations are as follows:

**Best Drama:** Murder in Company; **Best Musical:** Venice Revisited;

**Best Concert:** Anything Goes & Christmas with The Phoenix Theatre Singers

This is an incredible achievement, so congratulations to all of our nominees. We should be immensely proud of the high standard of productions/concerts that we continue to produce. The West Midlands Conference and Award Ceremony will take place on Sunday 14th April at Sutton Coldfield Town Hall.

**Michelle Cooper**

## Peter Gill - Talbot House



On Saturday 23rd March Peter Gill as Arthur Pettifer, together with Ian Barton as Tubby Clayton, presented Talbot House.

During the Great War, Talbot House in Poperinge, Belgium, a few short miles behind the front line, became a haven for thousands of allied troops – a ‘home from home’ where they enjoyed some home comforts and remembered the men that they really were. Run by a diminutive chaplain named Tubby Clayton the house became known by its army signaller’s code of Toc H and ultimately would be the inspiration for the association with that name. This play, written by Peter Gill, recreates the humour, music and wonderful atmosphere of this inspirational house.

*Photo by Ian Godsave*

## Summer Film Festival



Screen at the Phoenix are planning a Summer Film Festival in conjunction with Flicks in the Sticks. The festival will run from Sunday 28th July until Sunday 4th August. Screenings will be at 7.30pm each evening. No decision has yet been made as to which films to show, so any suggestions would be very welcome! We aim to appeal to summer visitors to Ross and also keep the theatre open for residents. We will need members to run the bar and FOH so any offers of help would again be very welcome. We will set up a committee to organise the event, so let me know if you would like to be involved.

**Graham Russell**



## March - June 2024 programme



**The Motive & the Cue (NT Live)**  
Sat 30th March 7.30pm



**The Lesson (15)**  
Sat 20th April 7.30pm



**The Holdovers (15)**  
Sat 4th May 7.30pm



**Nye (NT Live)**  
Sat 1st June 7.30pm

Tickets from the Phoenix Theatre website:  
<http://www.phoenix-theatre.org.uk/cinema/>

## **The Unexpected Guest (May Production)**

I am delighted to let you know that I have cast the production of 'The Unexpected Guest' by Agatha Christie and rehearsals are now in full swing .... the cast is:

Richard Warwick - Steve Bedford  
Laura Warwick - Jackie Phillips  
Michael Starkwedder - Phil Field  
Miss Bennett - Jacky Bedford  
Jan Warwick - Nathan Cole  
Mrs Warwick - Ann Stirrup  
Henry Angell - Maurice Thompson  
Sergeant Cadwallader - Terry Lewis  
Inspector Thomas - Brian Jackson  
Julian Farrar - Laurie Pegrum

and I also have an amazing backstage crew ....

Set in the 1950s, the action of the play takes place in Richard Warwick's study in the family home based in South Wales.

Lost in the fog, a stranger seeks refuge in a nearby house only to find a man shot dead and his wife standing over him with a smoking gun. But the woman's dazed confession is anything but convincing and the unexpected guest decides to help. Remarkably, the police clues point to a man who died two years previously but as the ghosts of a past wrong begin to emerge, a tangled web of lies reveals family secrets and chilling motives, where the real murderer turns out to be the greatest mystery of all ....

So come along and see the play in May and try to solve the whodunnit mystery!

The play runs from Saturday 18th to Saturday 25th May.

**Amanda Barrett (Director)**