

## Circular November 2020

### Welcome

Hello and welcome to the November 2020 issue of the Circular, the newsletter just for our Circle members.

Earlier this week, we were thrilled to be awarded gold in the Arts and Culture section of Welcome to Yorkshire's annual White Rose Awards. More on that later! Meanwhile...

It's all been a bit of rollercoaster for us this past couple of months. We restarted our live theatre programme at the beginning of October, and played to sold-out (at social distance) audiences for the first few shows: the reading of *Hansard*, heartbreakingly performed by Jemma Redgrave and Simon Slater; Simon's brilliant one-man show, *Bloodshot*; and the gently touching new play from the Godber family, *Sunny Side Up*!

Our cinema, too, was bringing happy filmgoers back in. We were thrilled that our mini film festival for Halloween week, Fright Fest by the Sea, appealed to so many people, with many of you taking advantage of the generous offer from our friends at Eat Me Café of a discount on five specials linked to the five films.

And an unexpected silver lining for us was the fact that so many of you discovered the joys of the readings of new plays, by professional actors – at £5 a ticket, we've long thought these were an amazing bargain, and it seems you do too: we recorded our biggest audiences ever for them in October! Along with the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, many of you have a hand in supporting them, via our New Work and Script Development Funds, so a huge thanks to anyone who came long for the first time. And just this week we were delighted to hear that the first of this autumn's readings, Sarah Gordon's *The Underdog*, about the Brontë family, has won the Nick Darke Award, which celebrates the best writing for stage, screen and radio.

Add into all that the fact that your feedback on our COVID safety measures was 100% positive – one audience member said she felt safer in our Round than she did in her own bedroom! – and it was all going swimmingly...

And then, lockdown 2.0 was announced. Couldn't be helped, of course – there are things in life that are so much more important than theatre! – but, yet again, our Artistic Director Paul Robinson's oft-quoted comment that recently it's been like 'working on quicksand' rang true.

The first victim was the reading of Alison Carr's *Dogwalker*. This dark comedy is something that we're interesting in developing for the Edinburgh Festival at some point. The two performances, on the evenings of 6 and 7 November, were sold out. And then, with less than a week to go, we had to cancel those dates. Undaunted, our amazing team – creative producer Amy Fisher, Carne Trust Associate Director Chelsey Gillard, and actor Deborah Tracey, with technical support from Dan Abell – leapt (and it's probably fair to say that's not a metaphor!) into action, and the two readings were staged consecutively at 6.30pm and 8.30pm on the evening of Wednesday 4 November, with just hours to go before lockdown started at a minute past midnight on the 5 November.

Sadly, we weren't able to do the same for the two main shows this month – *My Favourite Summer*, and *Orpheus & Eurydice*. We do hope to be able to bring you both at a later date – we'll keep you posted.

And now for the good news! Our two Christmas shows, *The Snow Queen* (live on stage) and *Haunting Julia* (an audio version on our website) are very much going ahead (barring any further announcements, of course). We've pushed the opening of *The Snow Queen* on by a couple of days – the original plan was to open it on the evening of Thursday 3 November, which would have given us about 36 hours after lockdown ended to iron out any issues that had arisen as a result – but we're raring to go. Find out more in this edition of the Circular.

### **'Christmas isn't cancelled in Scarborough...'**



Polly Lister in rehearsals for *The Snow Queen*  
© Tony Bartholomew



We're all so looking forward to getting back on stage in December with *The Snow Queen*. Our two brilliant Queens – Polly Lister and her 'alternate', Jacoba Williams, who'll be performing a couple of shows a week, and acting as understudy - have been hard at work in two completely separate 'bubbles': Polly is working with our Artistic Director Paul Robinson and Jacoba with our Carne Trust Associate Director, Chelsey Gillard.



Our Snow Queens - Polly Lister and her 'alternate' Jacoba Williams

You can find out much more about the show, and this unusual rehearsal process, in this lovely article from last week's Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/nov/20/solo-pantos-christmas-2020-cinderella-buttons>

## A haunting experience



Alan Ayckbourn © Tony Bartholomew

If you're not confident about returning to live theatre just yet – or even if you are – we hope you'll enjoy our exclusive audio recording of Alan Ayckbourn's classic *Haunting Julia*, with all three parts performed by the writer himself.

You can book for the show any time from now until the show ends on 5 January 2020, but can only listen from 1 December to 5 January.

You only need to book one ticket at a cost of £12, but as many people as are in your household or bubble can listen in – and as many times as you want from 1 December to 5 January. If you book before 1 December, you'll be sent a code which will allow you to access the show on 1 December. After that date, you'll be sent the code at time of booking.

To book, please go to: [https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1078/haunting\\_julia](https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1078/haunting_julia) or call our box office on 01723 370541. Our box office opening hours up to and including 2 December are 10am to noon weekdays only; after that, we'll be open Mondays to Saturdays noon to 5pm (noon to 8pm on days with a live performance).

And you can find out much, much more about the show in an article by our regular contributor, Simon Murgatroyd, at the end of this issue of the *Circular*.

## December films

As we mentioned earlier, we had to cancel our November film programme due to 'lockdown 2.0'. We've moved as many of them as we can to December – you can now see, on various dates between 1 and 12 December: Bill Murray and Rashida Jones in *On the Rocks*; an all-star cast including Toby Jones and Richard Armitage in the filmed version of the theatre production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (a must-see after it recently gained a coveted five stars from the BBC's Will Gompertz); the terrifying *Saint Maud* (much of it filmed just down the road on Scarborough seafront); the 2014 film of the NT's production of *War Horse*; and last, but not least, our tribute to the late, great Sean Connery, *Goldfinger*.



*It's A Wonderful Life* (1946)



*Die Hard* (1988)

They'll be followed in the second half of the month by our SJT Christmas Selection Box. This is a wonderfully diverse selection of classic Christmas movies (and don't blame us if we start a family argument over whether *Die Hard* is a Christmas film – that one's raging through our team as we write!).

They are: *The Nutcracker*, the streaming of the Royal Ballet version that's become something of a Christmas tradition at the SJT; *It's a Wonderful Life* – considered by many to be the greatest Christmas movie ever; *Die Hard* (yes, it *is* a Christmas movie!!); *Love Actually*; *Home Alone* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.

And a little festive challenge for the sharp-eyed among you. A former SJT actor – the late Bill Moody (*Invisible Friends*, *Wolf at the Door*, *This Is Where We Came In*) – plays the father of one of the central characters in one of the movies in our Selection Box. No prizes, but we'd love to see if anyone can spot him!

For more on all the films in our Christmas cinema programme, take a look at: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/whatson>

## White Rose Awards

We were thrilled on Monday to find out that we'd won gold in Welcome to Yorkshire's annual White Rose Awards.

We beat off some serious stiff competition in the Arts and Culture section - the rest of the shortlist comprised Harewood House, which took silver, Selby District Council (Selby 950), which was awarded bronze, and Hull's Freedom Festival Arts Trust, Huddersfield Literature Festival, Hull Libraries (The Big Malarkey Festival), Kala Sangam, and Yorkshire Sculpture International.

Our executive director Caroline Routh says: "This has been a tough year for just about everyone, and it's so nice to have something to celebrate for once.

"We were thrilled to win the White Rose Arts and Culture Award, and particularly to be shortlisted in such fantastic company. We're now looking forward to bringing our Christmas show, *The Snow Queen*, to Scarborough, live on stage throughout December, as well as an online treat – an audio recording of Alan Ayckbourn's *Haunting Julia*, performed by the writer himself."

The White Rose Awards is the largest tourism awards ceremony in the UK, an opportunity for Yorkshire to showcase the best and brightest it has to offer. The awards ceremony was held online on Monday evening.

## **Creative streak**

Do you write, sketch, paint, knit, sew – do you do, or want to do, anything creative at all, at any level of skill or ability?

If so, you might like to know about a new group we've launched in partnership with our new Associate Company, community producers ARCADE, in collaboration with COAST (Scarborough's Local Cultural, Education and Community Partnership).

The group will provide a forum for creative people who live in the borough to talk, share information and collaborate. It will meet monthly, initially by Zoom, and is open to all art forms, artistic practices, abilities and levels of experience, professional or otherwise.

Led and hosted by Rach Drew from ARCADE and co-led by Ceri Smith, the group attracted 35 people to its inaugural meeting – another is planned soon. You can find out more here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/scarboroughcreatives/>

## **From little acorns...**

We were delighted earlier this year to receive a personal grant from Lucy Robson at The Oak Foundation, and since September have been delivering a project in a local Eastfield school with plans to expand to a further three primary schools and a secondary school in the spring term.

Our Fundraising and Development Officer, Stephanie Dattani, says: "We're helping to build emotional resilience amongst the students to help them better combat the pressures they face in their everyday lives. We're using a number of techniques which are particularly key in understanding emotions: breathing, movement and basic body language.

"Working in socially distanced groups, our practitioners are delivering games to help concentration, focus and socialisation to explore emotional arcs and transitions. COVID-19 has increased those pressures in so many ways and we didn't realise how this work would become so much more urgent and critical.

"The feedback from the teachers has highlighted that this project is needed more than ever and with the generous support from Lucy and The Oak Foundation we are so grateful that we can deliver this."

## **God bless us every one!**

We had to find some excuse to use that quote at this time of year, didn't we? And here it is...

Many of you have enjoyed our series of friendly and informal play readings this year. We're rounding the year off with one last, festive session – a wonderful radio version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The script will be sent out in advance and we'll meet online using Zoom. No previous experience is necessary: you just need to bring yourself, your best reading voice – and perhaps your favourite Christmas jumper.



The reading will take place between 11.30am and 1.30pm on Wednesday 16 December, and there are 15 places available at just £5 each – you can book here:  
[https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1039/script\\_reading\\_online](https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1039/script_reading_online)

## Summoning The Spirits

by Simon Murgatroyd



1994 *Haunting Julia* (clockwise from top left)  
Ian Hogg, Alan Ayckbourn, Adrian McLoughlin  
& Damien Goodwin © Scarborough News

*"It was my attempt at a ghost story. I had long felt that, along with making audiences laugh, it must be enormously satisfying to make them jump in their seats and occasionally even scream."* Alan Ayckbourn

*Haunting Julia* begins with a ghost. But it's not a spectre of Alan Ayckbourn's creation, rather an earlier eerie visitation to the Stephen Joseph Theatre.

For to understand why Alan Ayckbourn made the unusual decision to write his first ghost story, *Haunting Julia*, one has to step back in time and meet the ghost of Jennet Humfrye

You probably know her better as *The Woman in Black*.

In 1987, Alan Ayckbourn took a sabbatical from Scarborough to become a Company Director at the National Theatre. In his stead, Robin Herford was appointed Co-Artistic Director to run the theatre on a day-to-day basis.

One of his earliest decisions was to commission a low-budget Christmas show for adults from the resident writer, Stephen Mallatratt, who suggested adapting the novella *The Woman in Black* by the Scarborough author, Susan Hill.

This was a traditional English ghost story perfect for Christmas but with just two actors and no budget to speak of, there were no lofty expectations.

No one expected theatrical magic to be created. Yet Robin's production achieved just that. Audiences jumped, screamed and had nightmares (at least this author did!). It would go on become a global phenomenon.

During Christmas 1987, one of the people who saw the original production was Alan Ayckbourn, who immediately saw its potential: "I thought it was terrific but I didn't think I could write anything quite like it."



Richard Derrington, Bill Champion & John Branwell in the 1998 revival of *Haunting Julia* © Tony Bartholomew

The seed of an idea had been planted and the playwright began to wonder whether he too could summon the spirits as successfully.

We don't know when Alan seriously began thinking about writing *Haunting Julia* – as he has frequently noted, ideas can gestate from months to years in his mind – but in all likelihood, he had a serious grip on the idea by 1993 at the latest, despite having no immediate plans to write it.

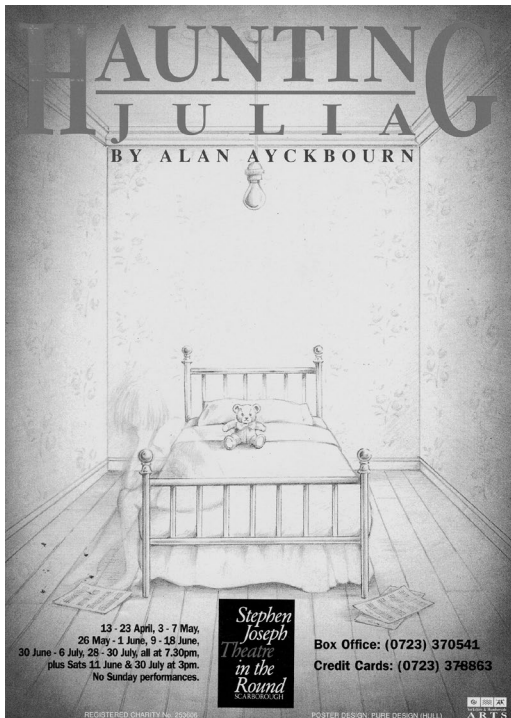
In context, Alan was immersed in the conversion of Scarborough's Odeon cinema into a new theatre and writing new plays was not a priority. Between September 1992 and December 1993, there were no new Ayckbourn plays.

It was intended the new theatre would open in two phases with the first completed during mid to late 1994. This would incorporate the end-stage space (now the McCarthy) and Alan's intention was to open it with the world premiere of a ghost story written specifically to take advantage of the space.

By early 1994, this plan had become untenable. The conversion was months behind schedule, whilst the UK government announced a surprise £5m cut in arts funding. This led to standstill funding from the Arts Council, which – in real-terms – equated to a cut.

The funding situation had an immediate effect on the proposed schedule for 1994 and Alan was forced to make a difficult decision. He already had a new play, *Communicating Doors*, opening in January, but to avoid cutting a play from the schedule, Alan made the unusual decision to immediately follow it up with another world premiere.

Fortunately, he already had the perfect solution in his head with *Haunting Julia* as it featured just three actors and a single set; a cheap Ayckbourn play, the closest the SJT had to a guaranteed money-maker.



1994 Haunting Julia - Cover  
© Scarborough Theatre Trust

The playwright began writing the play during February and to flesh out his original idea. For whilst the initial impetus was to write a successful ghost story, that wasn't enough in itself. The playwright frequently speaks of having three elements in place before he begins writing. He needed two others.

The second became the heart of *Haunting Julia*, which is most concerned with the relationship between parents and their children and how even the most well-intentioned love can have devastating consequences.

*"I was particularly interested in writing about parents and children – the difficulty of being a parent and establishing the necessary balance of distance and closeness. Children complain that their parents smother them but as every parent knows, there's a tendency to crowd them because the more you love them, the more you crowd them."*

This is inextricably tied up with the third element that interested the playwright, the nature of genius. Julia is a musical genius – dubbed 'Little Miss Mozart' much to her chagrin – and the play questions how she and her parents cope with not only this unexpected gift but also the attention and pressures it brings. This feeds back into the second element of how far does a parent go to protect their child.

There is also a key fourth thread to the play and that is Alan exploring the nature of suicide and the devastating effect it has on those close to the victim.

*"What you leave very often is people who question themselves for rest of their lives over whether they could have seen it coming. They go back over every conversation, every non-conversation. It's such a terrible thing."*

There's much more to *Haunting Julia* than initially meets the eye and, as the playwright himself admits, perhaps too much for it to work as the traditional ghost story he initially imagined.

*"The problem with writing Haunting Julia was that although I set out to write a ghost story, as ever I got distracted on the way. That's always happening. I set out sometimes to write frivolous farces, only one of the characters becomes deeply depressed or threatens to take their own life, and that's that. So, although the ghost of Julia still haunts the play, it is really about children, their parents and what they occasionally do to each other and to innocent bystanders – all in the name of love."*



Arguably, the complexity of the characters and themes makes the play so much richer allowing it to not only meet the tropes of a good horror story, but also leaving much to ponder and consider afterwards.



Richard Derrington in the 1998 revival of *Haunting Julia* © Tony Bartholomew

*Haunting Julia* is notable as the only all-male Ayckbourn play – although the playwright asserts ‘the women in the play are very strong offstage presences’.

It gives the play a unique perspective as it is essentially about not only all three men’s relationship to Julia but also their own wives and Alan was very keen to draw three engaging, if very different men.

Joe – Julia’s father – craves the answer to why Julia killed herself and who will go to any length to achieve it. Ken is a psychic, who apparently can provide the answers Joe is looking for. Finally there is Julia’s ex-boyfriend, Andy, a sceptic who neither believes in ghosts, Ken’s ‘abilities’ nor that Joe should even be searching for answers. Inspired by a character from the famed film *The Haunting*, itself based on Shirley Jackson’s classic novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, Andy’s scepticism and secrets are key to the play.

*Haunting Julia* also returns to one of the playwright’s favourite themes, our frequent inability to truly communicate with each other. It is probably more keenly explained in this play than any other, with the psychic Ken speaking for Alan.

*“A lot of what Ken says comes from me. He does say at one point that most of us don’t listen very much. When we are apparently listening to each other, what we’re actually doing early on in the conversation, if at all, is thinking what we’re going to say next and waiting for a gap to put it in so there’s much less communication than we imagine we’re having with each other.”*

*Haunting Julia* opened just two weeks after *Communicating Doors* closed – the shortest space between unrelated Ayckbourn plays opening at the SJT – and featured Ian Hogg as Joe, Adrian McLoughlin as Ken and Damian Godwin as Andy. Alan Ayckbourn said of the original production that ‘having Ian Hogg as Joe was extraordinary’.

Which leads to two unusual aspects of the original production and the titular character herself. The play features a memorable poster which, at first glance, appears to be just a simple pencil illustration of a bare room with a bed and Julia’s bear sat on it.

What is still missed by many people to this day is the very subtle, lightly-sketched girl sat on the bottom left-hand corner of the bed; an ethereal presence often ignored.

But whilst many people have never noticed Julia on the poster, there are many who argue that they noticed her in the play, convinced Julia appears. It is no spoiler to say no actress portrays Julia on stage.

As Archivist to this theatre, I once remember having a heated argument with someone who would not accept an actress did not portray Julia on stage – which is an incredible testament to the extraordinary performance of Ian Hogg which palpably suggested someone was sharing the stage with him.

*Haunting Julia* opened at the SJT and was a success for the theatre, so much so that it was revived in 1999 in The McCarthy, finally presented as intended, and then again in 2008 when Hogg and McLoughlin returned to the roles they originated.

And now, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had such a brutal effect on our theatres, Alan has revived the play again. Recording it at home and taking on all three roles himself following the success of his audio play *Anno Domino* earlier this year.

It is a play he has always been fond of, but did it actually achieve what he initially set out to do despite becoming so much more? Let's leave it to the playwright to answer that one.

*"It's a play about coming to terms with sudden loss. Of the difficulty of truly understanding human genius. Of living with an abnormal talent. Of the effect that a suicide must have on those left behind. Of the guilt and the anger and the sorrow it can create in its wake. And, yes, it's still a ghost story. And I must confess to a great thrill when, on the opening night, the whole audience did rise several inches off their seats in shock. And, yes, someone actually screamed."*

Simon Murgatroyd is Alan Ayckbourn's Archivist and administrator of his official website [www.alanayckbourn.net](http://www.alanayckbourn.net).

The article above is an extended version of that which appears in the programme for the audio version of *Haunting Julia*. You can book for the show any time from now until the show ends on 5 January 2020, but can only listen from 1 December to 5 January.

You only need to book one ticket at a cost of £12, but as many people as are in your household or bubble can listen in – and as many times as you want from 1 December to 5 January. If you book in November, you'll be sent a code which will allow you to access the show on 1 December. After that date, you'll be sent the code at time of booking.

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## Membership

By now, most of you should have received your new membership packs. If you're still waiting, please be patient for just a little while longer – we ran out of membership cards and pin badges! We've ordered more, and they should be with us very shortly.