

Circular December 2020

A Christmas message from Paul and Caroline...

Dear Circle member

As we approach the end of 2020, many of us will be looking back to this time last year and probably thinking: "If you'd told me then what was going to happen, I would never have believed it!"

But yes, 2020 **did** happen, and in the most improbable fashion any of us could ever have imagined. It was so far from what we expected, but we all tried to make the most of it.



Paul Robinson and Caroline Routh
© Tony Bartholomew

Here at the SJT, we feel we achieved an awful lot, given the circumstances – and not one bit of it would have been possible without the support of you, our loyal Circle members. Thank you!

Here's a quick round-up of just some of those achievements:

- We were one of the first UK theatres to bring live work back on stage, including the world premiere of a new John Godber play, *Sunny Side Up!* – this led to *The Guardian* calling us 'the canary in the coalmine'.
- We received 100% positive feedback from audiences for our COVID safety precautions. And we're still working on them: we recently contracted UK Theatre associate MegaHertz to provide full decontamination of the theatre, and we've invested in our own anti-viral fogging equipment.
- We welcomed two new Associate Companies and created new work with them – they were:
 - Dance theatre specialists Voxed, with whom we launched #Goggledance, an accessible participatory project aimed at deprived communities in Scarborough.
 - Community producers ARCADE – we partnered with them on Scarborough Creatives, a new networking group for creatives across the borough.
- We launched our first-ever audio play, *Anno Domino*, written by our Director Emeritus Alan Ayckbourn and performed by him and his wife,

Heather Stoney. It garnered listeners worldwide and was widely covered in both the British and American media – the *Wall Street Journal* said: “What the SJT is doing with *Anno Domino* can and should serve as a model for how individual American theater companies respond to the pandemic.” (We were quite pleased with that one!)

- We retained all our core staff, topping furlough up to 100%, and honoured all freelance contracts outstanding when lockdown started, with better terms than those agreed by UK Theatre/Equity.
- We created many freelance contracts via our autumn season and quickly reconfigured our Christmas show to allow it to go ahead, thereby creating more freelance contracts.
- We continued our essential OutReach programme, including:
 - An online summer school for all ages with three specially commissioned films featuring performance poets from across the UK – they’re really worth seeing, and you can still catch them here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUSLMwqFXyQ>
 - Partnering with the National Literacy Trust on ‘Your Stories’, an online story creation adventure for five-to-12-year-olds.
 - Moving as much participatory work as possible online, including scriptwriting classes, youth groups, choirs and masterclasses.
 - Our education practitioners are currently working in local schools to help students reintegrate and explore the impacts of lockdown.
- We supported staff members in voluntary roles: wardrobe assistant Isabel Innes made PPE for hospitals; other staff volunteered for both the local Community Kitchen, which delivered meals to those in need, and with the local Carer’s Resource, making regular contact with isolated people.
- We teamed up with Scarborough’s popular Eat Me Café. They’re in our bar/lounge area until at least the end of February 2021, introducing many new people to the building, and allowing them to continue operating, their existing premises being uneconomical at social distance.
- Last month, we took gold in the White Rose Awards Arts and Culture section. Judges praised our ‘innovative approach to accessibility and inclusivity, rave reviews... great online and social media presence, international profile and real commitment to engaging the local community’.

So, as you can see, despite everything, it’s still been a busy year for us. And – we’re happy to say it again – we couldn’t have done it without you, our

wonderful Circle members. So we wanted to take this opportunity to wish you a **very** Merry Christmas and a positive and hopeful New Year – we're all looking forward to seeing you all again in 2021!

With love and best wishes



Paul and Caroline

And a message from our Fundraising and Development Officer, Stephanie...



Stephanie Dattani

Hello everyone,

Just a little note from my side to let those of you who don't already know that I am due to go on maternity leave in mid-January. I'll be back before you know it – just before summer 2021. Thank you for all of your support and kindness during a somewhat crazy 2020!

Don't worry: we have plans in place for you all to be looked after. Caroline and Paul will be keeping you all in the loop, and if you have any membership queries, please forward

to box.office@sjt.uk.com or call Box Office on 01723 370541. They will be happy to assist you.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Love Stephanie

Haunting Julia

"Just three voices exploring some incredibly big issues. It's something really special... one of his best."

That was Nick Ahad, *Yorkshire Post* theatre critic, playwright and arts pundit extraordinaire (he's just joined the presenting team on *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4's flagship arts programme) talking about *Haunting Julia* with Dr Sarah Walker on BBC Radio 3's *Sunday Morning* programme.

It followed a glowing review in *The Guardian*: their chief theatre critic, Arifa Akbar, gave the show four stars, saying: "At points, it begins to feel like a whodunnit; at others, a family psychodrama; and then back to a haunted house story. It is engaging on every level and keeps us guessing until the end."

We're thrilled to get such great comments on our Christmas treat for those of you that prefer to stay at home – Haunting Julia is written, directed and performed by Alan Ayckbourn, and is available only on the SJT website at the bargain price of just £12 – which covers you, and anyone else in your household/bubble, from the date you buy the ticket until it expires on 5 January.

If you don't want to miss out on the show that's got the top critics raving, make sure you listen in soon – it's will only be on our website until 5 January:

https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1078/haunting_julia

If you'd like to more about what Nick thought, click here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000q38b> (from 1 hour 55 minutes in).

And to read Arifa's full review, click here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/nov/26/haunting-julia-review-alan-ayckbour-mozart-psyhic>

“It was WOW!”



Polly Lister in The Snow Queen © Tony Bartholomew

If you want to see our fabulous The Snow Queen, you really need to hurry – at time of writing, we have less than 180 tickets available, and they're selling fast!

If you need any encouragement, here's an entirely random selection of some of the dozens of joyous comments we've had from our audiences:

“What an absolute joy Snow Queen is... totally terrific.”



Polly Lister in *The Snow Queen* © Tony Bartholomew

“What a truly mesmerising afternoon in the round and how magical and alive the theatre looks, all trimmed up and lit up.”

“In absolute awe of Polly’s talents! Loved it all – puppet characters, use of set and props, #online, script, jokes, lighting, music, songs...”



Polly Lister in *The Snow Queen* © Tony Bartholomew

“It was WOW. I’m speechless tbh. One actress playing so many parts, all with different accents and costumes. Singing and dancing... AND puppets. Daft songs and so many giggles at all the crazy characters... I can’t wait to watch it again.”

“What a fantastic show it was so brilliant to see the theatre alive again full of energy and fun... Scarborough is in for a treat this Christmas... so proud of our theatre.”

“We cannot praise the SJT staff highly enough, this show is sensational and we watched it in comfort and safety. We could not ask for more. Our group was 2 males, 2 females, 2 being 40 and 2 are 60+. It was a completely new experience for one of our party and she loved it.”

“Thanks SJT for a great evenings entertainment last night, my granddaughter and I enjoyed “The Snow Queen” what energy and enthusiasm – thanks to all the staff for keeping us all safe.”

If there are tickets left by the time you read this – you can book here:

https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1015/the_snow_queen

Lighting a fuse...

We were delighted to receive sponsorship from a local charity (which wishes to remain anonymous) to continue our work with Fuse youth theatre.

Fuse youth theatre is an inclusive youth theatre for both young people with learning disabilities and additional needs and those from mainstream education. It aims to enable young people to work together to create new pieces of theatre, learning performance and other skills that could follow them into their future lives to assist with their independence as adults. Fuse is about respect, joy and equity.

Alison Jeffels, solicitor at Pinkney Grunwells, says: "I represent the trustees of a local trust whose aim is to provide much needed financial support to charitable organisations in the North Yorkshire region. Making theatre accessible to the young people across North Yorkshire and supporting FUSE Theatre at the SJT came to the trustees' attention at a time when the future of the younger generation and performance arts have been really hit hard due to the pandemic."

Crystal clear

We've recently installed a new system which will enhance the theatre experience for both visually impaired and hard-of-hearing audience members.

The Dolby Fidelio system enables both audio description of a performance for visually impaired customers and assistive listening for customers who are hard of hearing, enabling them to enjoy more SJT productions, including films in our cinema.

The user upon arrival collects a Fidelio receiver pack which they take with them to their seat in the auditorium. We can provide headphones, or the user may wish to bring their own pair to plug into the unit using the standard mini jack connector.

Each receiver can be programmed to hear an amplified version of the show picked up via a microphone in the space or, on specific performances, an audio description of the production. This is also available on many items in the film programme.

The user has a volume control to ensure that the received audio is at a comfortable level and they can get the most out of our varied programme of work.

The system has been bought with support from the Theatres Trust, the national advisory body for theatres. The Trust's Improving Accessibility round of the Theatre Improvement Scheme, in association with the Wolfson Foundation, contributed £9,500 towards the project.

Tom Stickland, Theatres Advisor at the Theatres Trust, says: “Ensuring audiences can access high quality performances is an essential part of the Theatres Trust’s mission of protecting theatres for everyone. This system will remove barriers to engagement with the excellent work of the Stephen Joseph Theatre.”

Our Executive Director, Caroline, says: “We’re delighted to have had the new Dolby Fidelio system installed in time for our festive Christmas show, *The Snow Queen*, which has an audio-described performance on Saturday 19 December at 1pm.

“It’s all part of our continuing commitment to making the theatre as widely accessible as possible.”

Happy New Year!

We’ve been so pleased to team up with Scarborough Spa and the brilliant Spa Orchestra, the last remaining professional seaside orchestra in the UK, to bring their traditional New Year’s Day concert to our Round (the Spa is currently closed).

They’ll be playing two concerts, at 2pm and 5.30pm. At time of writing, the earlier event is almost full, but there are still a few tickets left for the 5.30pm – hurry if you want to join them!

https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1118/the_legendary_scarborough_spa_orchestra_in_concert

The First Christmas

Christmas is already in full swing at the SJT – as you probably know if you’ve been to see *The Snow Queen* starring the fabulous Polly Lister and, on certain performances, the equally talented Jacoba Williams!

It’s the latest in a string of mad seasonal adaptations by Nick Lane which have become an annual treat at the SJT.

But what was the first Christmas play to be staged by the company – and was it anything like what we expect today?

Let’s travel back to Christmas Past and find out...

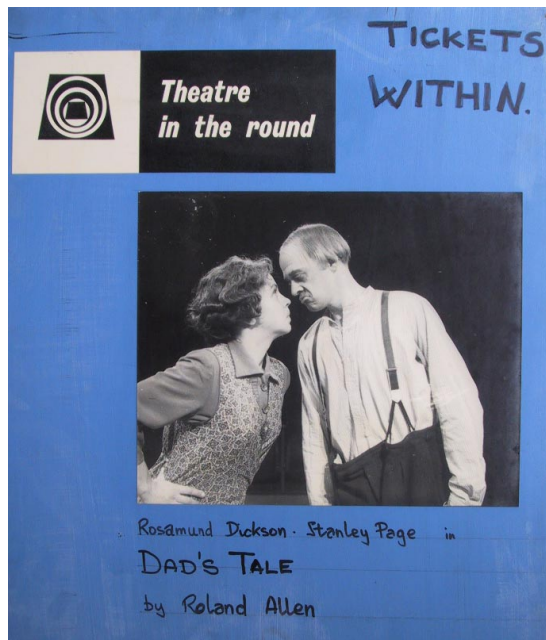


A scene from *Dad's Tale* with a moustachioed Alan Ayckbourn having fisticuffs with David Jarrett © Haydonning Ltd.

Stephen Joseph founded The Library Theatre in 1955, but it wasn’t until 1957 that he began scheduling winter seasons.

Celebrating Christmas was either something Stephen wasn’t terribly interested in or he just had a terrible idea of what constituted a Christmas play. How else to explain John Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger* the week before Christmas 1957 or Sartre’s *Huis Clos* for Christmas week 1959? There’s nothing like an existentialist drama to bring home the message of Christmas.

The first proper attempt at what might recognisably be called a Christmas play came in 1960 and it was, as far as anyone remembers, an unmitigated disaster.



A poster board (of sorts) for *Dad's Tale*

"Stephen just said: 'Um... will you be putting any ballet into your play?' And I said 'WHAT!' and he said: 'Ballet.' Well I pointed out that I didn't write ballet but Stephen just said I should."

Unknown to Alan, Stephen had signed a deal with Manchester-based British Dance Drama Theatre, who had performed at The Library Theatre during the summer, to collaborate on a Christmas play.

Unperturbed by the lack of what could be termed quite important details – and despite his surprising lack of experience in all things balletic – Alan set about the writing the play, *Dad's Tale*, with a cunning plan in mind.

"What I had to do was write the play overall, then write separately the story that the ballets should take."

It was also, much to my shame as his Archivist, a new play by Alan Ayckbourn.

In 1960, Stephen had the bright idea it might be worth staging a children's play for Christmas; having obviously exhausted angst, philosophy and obscure Russian comedies about housing shortages during previous seasons.*

Alan took on the responsibility of writing the play unaware that Stephen had failed to impart a quite vital piece of information.

Dad's Tale by Roland Allen

Martin
Auntie
Dad
Jenny
Clerk, Labourer, Sid Filch,
Grocer, Mr. Breakwater,
Roger Freddington-Bishop,
and Removal man
Removal man and Policeman

David Jarrett
Rosamund Dickson
Stanley Page
Hazel Burt

The Dancers
Tonya Burcka
Jennifer Wright
Brenda Elder
Frances Harper
Robert Horobin

Production by Clifford Williams.

Choreography by Gerard Bagley, Director, British Dance Drama Theatre.

Costumes for the dance sequences by the British Dance Drama Theatre.

Policeman's uniform by courtesy of the North Riding Constabulary.

Nylon Stockings by Kayser Bondor.

Overture music — an Andres Segovia programme, on Brunswick AXTL 1060.

The play will be acted through without an interval.

Please do not smoke in the theatre.

The company is grateful to the Director and Libraries Committee for help and co-operation in setting up the Theatre in the round.

The front of house assistance has been kindly arranged by our Local Honorary Secretary, Kenneth Boden, and the Scarborough Theatre Guild.

Extract from the programme showing Alan's multiple roles and the fact it was attributed to Roland Allen

Essentially, the ballets are totally superfluous to the plot about young Martin and his destitute family who have all their world possessions repossessed and are faced with a Christmas dinner of beef dripping.

Highlights include an entire scene dedicated to drawing the dole, hilarity with bailiffs taking a family's possessions, the father turning into a budgerigar and, of course, ballets representing the dreams of the family. It is what might be termed a mixed bag.

There was another issue to contend with too. The budget made no allowance for the companies to rehearse together...

"It had an extraordinary brief. It was written for two companies who weren't going to meet until very late on in rehearsals. Clifford Williams was directing our company; Gerard Bagley was directing the dance company."



Two of the dancers from British Dance Drama Theatre in *Dad's Tale* © Haydonning Ltd.

So the Library Theatre company rehearsed the drama scenes in Scarborough and British Dance Drama Theatre rehearsed the ballets in Manchester, before the companies collided and merged just in time for performance.

"We fused them together when the two companies got together in Scarborough for dress rehearsals. Once or twice the actors got involved in the ballets, but they were always pushed around or shoved into places."

One of which actors was Alan himself. For at this point in his career, he was still firmly intending to pursue a career as a professional actor and wrote plays to highlight his acting skills. In this case, it may not have been entirely successful.

"This was the last time I played multiple roles. I spent the evening rushing on and off, changing moustaches. During one performance a woman exclaimed: 'Oh no! Not him again.'"

Additional to this, the scheduling did not fall in the production's favour, largely due to the company's inexperience of handling Christmas plays. The dates precluded the financial benefits of school performances or, actually, even the presence of children...

"It was not a success (a) because I think we were into a winter season in Scarborough, which never established itself; and (b) because it was a children's play, but we were actually doing it at a time when there weren't any children around! Instead of doing it in school time, when you could con a few of them in there, we were doing it just before Christmas."



Dancer Tonya Burcka with Rosamund Dickson in Dad's Tale

Despite all this – and against the odds – perhaps the play was actually a success? Sadly, barely anyone was there to decide and Alan took it all quite badly.

“It opened just before Christmas and, including the director, played to an audience of five with an average age of 40. It was my first taste of theatrical failure. I was very depressed and gave up writing for several months.”

Of course, Alan’s early plays were written under the pseudonym of Roland Allen, so Alan might have hoped he would not be associated with the play. No such luck. Stephen revealed Roland was Alan within the programme!

As for *Dad’s Tale*, it toured briefly to Newcastle-under-Lyme’s Municipal Hall and was never seen again. Alan withdrew it, never allowed it to be published and for many years said he had deliberately destroyed every copy of it. He didn’t – but it’s a good story!

The final word goes to Stephen Joseph without whom this extraordinary tale would never have come about. That, at the end, he felt the play was problematic can arguably seen in his programme note, which with hindsight seems quite defensive.

“This is something quite unique. You may like it; you may not. But you cannot see it anywhere else except here. No pundit from London is going to tell you whether it is good or bad; no critics are going to fill the national papers with important comments on it. This is a play written for you, as well as for us. It will succeed or fail, depending on your opinion and whether audiences come to see it or not.”

In retrospect, Alan himself would agree that whilst these aims were notable, they perhaps deserved a stronger play than *Dad’s Tale* to carry them through!

It’s probably fair to say that whilst Christmas plays did not get off to the strongest of starts at the SJT, they did eventually develop into something rather special.

Although who fancies a bit of an existentialist drama next Christmas just for a change?

* That one is Valantin Kataev’s *Squaring The Circle* from New Year week 1958...

The Snow Queen, adapted by Nick Lane from the story by Hans Christian Andersen, starring Polly Lister and directed by Paul Robinson, can be seen at the SJT until 31 December. Book now via www.sjt.uk.com